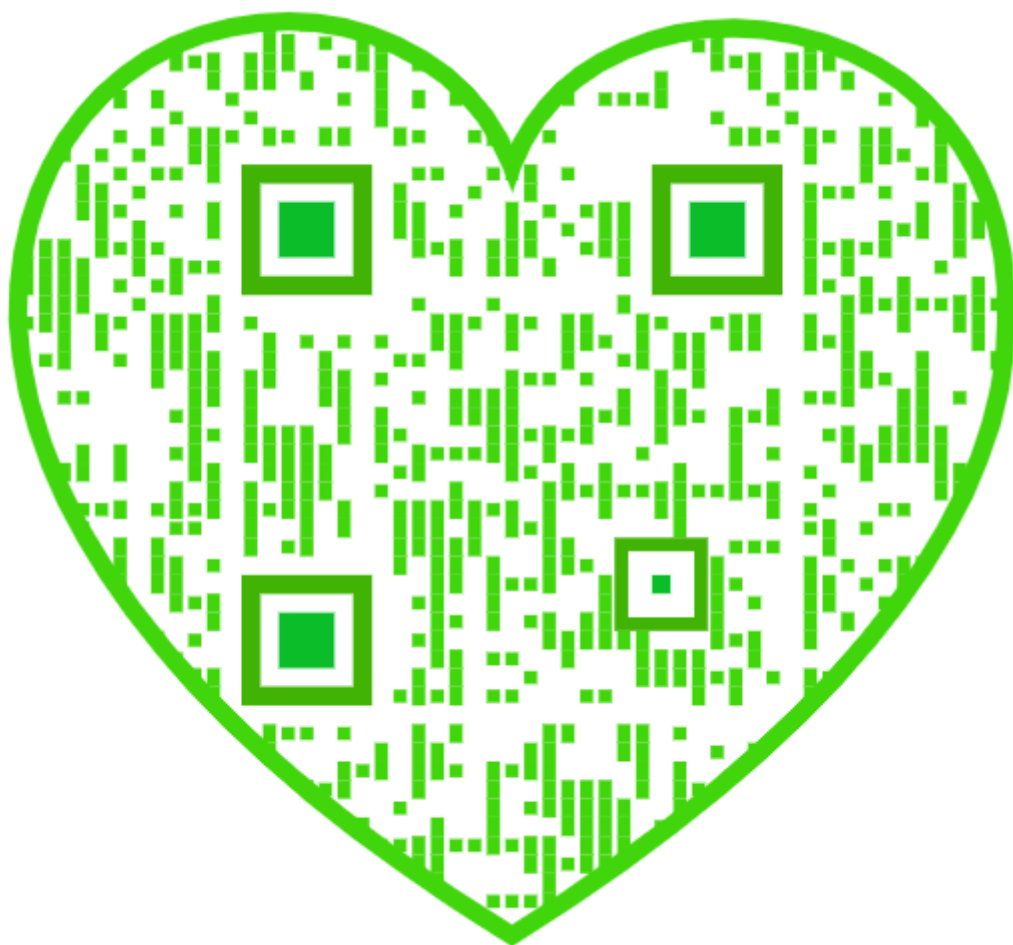


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Illustrator Kinta

6



My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



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C O N T E N T S

Prologue

Over in the Empire

Chapter 1

Ordinary Days in the Black Forest

Chapter 2

To Forge or Not to Forge

Chapter 3

A Letter to the Emperor

Chapter 4

A Slightly Different Kind of Morning

Chapter 5

Peace Talks Behind Closed Doors

Chapter 6

Another Member of the Family

Epilogue

In the Empire's National Library

The Story of How We Met VIII

In the Footsteps of the One She Admires

Afterword

Prologue: Over in the Empire

Within the heart of the empire's palace was a room, one lacking a throne but with lavish furnishings nevertheless. This was one of the emperor's several parlors.

At the moment, the room's master—the emperor—was wearing a smile that evoked in his daughter, the seventh imperial princess, a sense of foreboding.

“Did Your Majesty say the Black Forest?” the princess asked, her tone dubious.

“Indeed,” the emperor replied blithely. “A most interesting man, no?”

In response to her father's cheery delivery of an outrageous statement, she could only muster a feeble, “I see.”

The Black Forest was an expansive forest covering a significant portion of the kingdom's territory. Within its bounds, violent wolves, bears, and tigers were known to roam, and even the herbivorous deer were said to be a threat. A single mistake in that place could lead to death, and a normal person would beat a hasty retreat before they managed to spend even one full day beneath the canopy.

Supposedly, a run-of-the-mill blacksmith lived and plied his trade from within that infamous forest. That was the news the emperor had just relayed to her. To take his words for anything but a joke required substantial effort.

“So? Do you have business with this eccentric you speak of?” she asked.

“In a sense. You recall the outcries for revolution a while ago?”

“Yes. Everything is being tidied up neatly.”

“Actually, because of a...blunder, we detained a certain mercenary...” the emperor said with a dry chuckle. “However, she was quickly rescued, and by none other than the blacksmith.”

“That's...”

At the time, every city had been thrown into a state of chaos. The cleanup was proceeding, but it couldn't be denied that there was still unresolved commotion. It would take some time before all was well again.

The princess had a difficult time believing that a common blacksmith could carry out a rescue mission in the midst of such turmoil. Had the information come from anyone other than the emperor, she would have laughed it off.

And although her father *was* fond of jokes, the princess well knew that he seldom jested in moments like these.

Looking at her father's amused visage, she was struck again by a bad premonition.

"Won't you go and have a look?" the emperor asked. "I'd like for you to invite him here."

"Do you not intend to eliminate the mercenary and blacksmith both?"

Regardless of whether it had been the empire's mistake or not, the two had gleaned a portion of the nation's secrets. The fact that they lived in the depths of the Black Forest, territory where most dared not enter, meant that they were skilled. Thus, these were not people the empire could afford to overlook.

"We stand to lose more than we gain by employing such a tactic," replied the emperor.

"I could concede that in the case of the mercenary...but the blacksmith too? He is no more than an average tradesman, no?"

"On paper, yes." Her father brought a hand to his furrowed brow. "Considering the circumstances, I have, of course, probed into his background. But nothing much has turned up, except for one piece of information: his works are high quality."

"Perhaps he is nothing more than a skilled craftsman," she suggested.

"I've entertained the possibility," he replied, raising an eyebrow. "But the number of unknowns is exceptionally high."

"Do you mean to suggest that...information has been purposefully concealed?"

“That’s my hypothesis. Aren’t you curious about this man who the kingdom has gone through such great lengths to hide?” Her father’s lips split into a grin.

The princess sighed deeply. “I suppose.” And with a second great sigh, she conceded. “I will prepare. Please let me know if there is anything else you should like me to do before I depart, father.”

He nodded, calm and collected. “I leave it in your hands.”

Without another word, she curtsied and took her leave. The room which had borne witness to the father and daughter’s discussion sank into silence.

Chapter 1: Ordinary Days in the Black Forest

“We really went through a lot...” I mused to myself, recalling the adventure my family and I had just returned from.

It had all started when Samya remembered seeing a rare type of stone in the Black Forest. We’d decided to venture into the unknown, camping along the way, and coincidentally, we had encountered a fellow mercenary of Helen’s named Flore. The climax of our journey? A showdown with a dragon! Overall, we were only gone a handful of days, but they had been packed with adventure.

The day after we got home was perfectly ordinary. I woke up and went to the lake to bathe Krul, our drake, and Lucy, a wolf pup (and a magical beast) who we’d taken in after she’d lost her mother. I also wanted to freshen myself up.

During the last several days, Krul had picked up dirt and dust from our extended travels, so she enjoyed her rinsing more than usual.

After I wiped down Lucy, she shook her body to dry off, sending water flying everywhere, but that was par for course for our little girl.

I refilled our water jugs at the lake, and Krul and I split the load on our way back to the cabin. Home again, I commenced breakfast prep while the others in the family got ready for the day.

My family now had quite a few members: Samya, a beastfolk I’d saved from the brink of death; Rike, a dwarven blacksmith who was also my apprentice; Diana, the young lady of the Eimoor comital family who’d come to live with us after I’d helped resolve a family conflict; and Lidy, an elf who’d first hired me to repair an heirloom sword and who I’d reunited with on a military expedition to exterminate a monster nest.

The fifth and final member—not including me, Lucy, or Krul—was Helen. She had commissioned a pair of custom model swords from me. Later on, I’d helped extract her from the empire when she’d gotten wrapped up in a revolutionary

crisis.

The others were all women, so even though they had no work that took them outside in the mornings, they still needed more time than me to get ready. In the meantime, I made soup and baked flatbread.

The time we'd gone to visit Sandro at his restaurant, The Gold-Tusked Boar, he'd served us an unending course of delicious dishes, despite the fact that the eatery had been packed with other customers. The gap between his skills and mine was vast, but such was the prowess of a pro. I may have been granted production-related cheat abilities when I first came to this world, but they only put me a touch above the average tradesman.

These cheats, however, meant I was still more skilled than most, and those skills no doubt enriched our everyday lives. I had no intention of using my cheats to get rich—the most important thing to me was that the six of us lived in harmony.

And so, after we finished breakfast, we moved to the forge to begin smithing. I heated the firebed and furnace, then we divvied up the tasks and got to work.

Our present assignment was to forge a total of fifty hoes, with a daily quota of ten. We already had eleven complete—they'd been forged before we'd embarked on our treasure hunt. Assuming we met our target today too, we would have around thirty left to make, which we could finish in three days. At that pace, we'd be able to make our deadline with ease.

The problem...came after that.

No, I wasn't worried about making our quotas, but rather, about the fast-approaching rainy season. The heavens had done their best to hold back the storms until this point, but they would soon hit their limit.

Samya had even said, "I wouldn't be surprised if it started to rain tomorrow." *That* was how close the rains were.

We were running out of time. We had to prepare.

Forge Eizo always made large deliveries to our merchant partner, Camilo, but I hoped to push back our next drop-off date by two or three weeks. We could spend the extra time preparing for the rainy season, as well as crafting a shared

trinket for the family. That was, of course, depending on how much inventory Camilo had left.

Regardless, we first had to finish up our current order.

The sound of hammering reverberated through the workshop. Rike and Helen sang as they worked (Helen was a good singer), and thanks to their enthusiasm, four days flew by fast, our tasks proceeding like clockwork.

In the end, we made fifty-six hoes—more than our target. Camilo would have no complaints.

The night we hit our quota, we celebrated with a toast, a humble reward for our hard work. Afterward, we stayed around the dinner table to discuss our upcoming plans.

“I’m in favor of staying in,” Samya said regarding the upcoming rains. “We beastfolk bed down in our dens for the season.”

“Makes sense,” Diana concurred.

No one else seemed to have any objections either, but I spoke up with my concerns. “The thought of holing ourselves up in the house...is a little depressing.”

We were blacksmiths by trade, which meant that our work was conducted entirely indoors. The trip to the lake for water and our nightly spars were the only times we got to breathe fresh air. Getting rid of those moments completely would certainly deal a blow to our mental health.

“If only we had a place that would provide cover and allow us to enjoy the outside air,” I said.

“Like a covered terrace, right?” Rike suggested. “It would block the rain but let the breeze through.”

“Good idea.”

I looked around to gauge everyone else’s reactions; no one seemed opposed.

That settles it. We’re building a terrace.

“Any other must-haves before we cloister ourselves in...?” I asked the group.

Lidy replied, “We’ll need to go hunting and stock up on meat,” and Helen’s stance was, “I only came to live here recently, so I’m gonna leave the decisions up to you all.”

I nodded. *Well, that should just about round off the to-do list.*

“To sum it up, we should hunt whatever we need as soon as we can. When the rains start, we’ll avoid leaving the house as much as possible and do what we can indoors,” I concluded. “Sounds about right?”

The biggest problem I could foresee was Krul...but she might figure it out for herself when I took her to retrieve water, clever girl that she was.

“All right then, let’s give it our all tomorrow,” I said, bringing our day to a close.

We were going to be heading to Camilo’s the following day, another step in our familiar routine. After finishing my preparations, I turned in to rest and relax.

The next morning, we completed our daily chores and then worked together to load the large number of hoes onto the cart.

Krul watched us work—I thought I could see a spark of anticipation burning in her eyes. She was always particularly enthusiastic when it came to pulling a heavy load or going a long distance, and once we arrived at our destination, we always made sure to shower her with praises for her extra effort.

Once we stacked up all fifty-some-odd hoes, I hitched Krul to the cart, and we all piled in.

When Diana went to pick Lucy up and help her onto the cart, Lucy leaned into a deep crouch. Our little wolf was staring intently at the platform.

Is she challenging herself to jump in? She looks kind of like a cat right now...

With a sudden burst of energy, Lucy sprang into the air.

Well, what do you know!

But...I had celebrated too early. Lucy fell short of her target by about ten centimeters and landed back on the ground with a *thump*. Behaving like nothing had happened, she padded over to Diana as if to say, “Mama, pick me

up!”

Well, she'll make the mark sooner or later.

Diana lifted Lucy and climbed onto the cart. Her eyes were twinkling with excitement, but since she had her hands full, my shoulder made it out safe.

Today, the air in the Black Forest hung damp and heavy, as if to proclaim that the rainy season was near. Had I been initially dumped into the forest by the Watchdog during this season, I would've had a very different first impression; straight away, it would've been obvious why the forest was rumored to be a terrifying place.

Samya's nose twitched as she sniffed the air. When I asked her about it, she answered, "It's hard to pick out different scents when it's so humid." I assumed it was because the moisture enhanced each individual smell, or perhaps because the trees were giving off more phytoncides.

With Samya working at a disadvantage, our defenses were slightly weaker. Even so, Helen was accompanying us, so I doubted we'd run into any trouble.

The family stayed cautious as we weaved our way through the forest. Once, through the gaps between trees, I caught a glimpse of tree deer far away. Since I was able to see it despite the distance, it had to be big.

Lucy watched the deer as well, her tail lashing back and forth. Maybe she had sensed its gaze.

Even though her tail was wagging, she didn't bark. Had she realized that barking would be a pointless endeavor? If so, she would be quite the superstar. I rewarded her with a pat on the head, and her tail went wild.

After observing the tree deer for a moment, Samya muttered, "They've begun their gorge..."

"Oh?" I asked.

"If we want one, we'll have to hunt this week," Samya explained. "They'll retreat to their dens before long to wait out the rain."

Tree deer went into seclusion during the rainy season too. Their hides offered protection to be sure, but the rains likely sapped their strength, making them

vulnerable to the bears and wolves that were sure to come sniffing around.

To frame it another way—bear encounters would be more common during the season.

“I’m counting on you for the hunt,” I told Samya. “We do need meat, but watch out for bears.”

“But of course,” she replied, her head held high.

Of all the animals we were most likely to run into, the bears that lived here posed the biggest threat. Samya had almost lost her life to one once.

I peeked over at Diana, Lidy, and Helen, who all nodded back. We were a strong party; we knew how to watch our backs.

Luckily, nothing unusual happened in the forest. We left the trees for the road. From there, the city was only a short ride away.

Above us, the clouds hung heavy. The sky didn’t look like it was going to pour any second now, but neither was there a single ray of sunshine. This kind of scenery screamed that it was the perfect opportunity for misfortune to strike.

When the city became visible, I let out a laugh. “With this weather, it looks as if the entire city is wrapped up in some horrible conspiracy. Almost like a page taken straight out of an illustrated novel.”

A rumble of thunder would complete the staging for the suspense story.

“It’s because the weather isn’t in the least bit refreshing,” Diana said. As a member of a noble house, she had experienced scenes of tension and drama in real life.

Rike and Lidy chuckled, but Samya and Helen looked like they had no idea what we were talking about.

They might not have read such stories very often. Maybe I’ll ask Camilo for some books next time...

Once in the city, we took the roads we always did. Lidy had attracted a lot of attention in the capital because she was an elf, but people here paid her little mind. If anything, Lucy, who was peering out from the cart, was the star of the show. Even the stern bear of a stall keeper who had a perpetual scowl on his

face waved to Lucy when he thought no one was looking.

Cuteness is justice, after all. Liking cute things wasn't a crime.

As Lucy single-handedly (*single-pawedly*) spread her love through the streets, we made our way to Camilo's shop.

When we arrived at the store, we rode around to the storehouse and got off the cart. I unhitched Krul, and Lucy leaped off by herself. Even though the platform was fairly high (high enough that she couldn't jump *in*, at least), she stuck the landing with no trouble.

Diana had been prepared to help Lucy down, and she watched the pup now with a complex expression somewhere between lonely and delighted.

Maybe magical beasts mature faster than their counterparts.

In the back garden, we left Krul and Lucy to the care of the shop apprentice. Lucy's tail was wagging as usual, full of anticipation for the play session. Krul, on the other hand, lay down in the shade of a tree, from where she could watch over Lucy. She had become quite the responsible big sister.

With our hearts warmed by the scene, we went upstairs to the conference room. Camilo came in soon after. There was no way he wasn't busy, but he was diligent as always.

"How's everything?" I asked in greeting.

"Business as usual," he replied. "I've finally eked out a corner for myself in the republic's markets."

"That's good news. Congratulations."

"Thanks." He rubbed at his mustache. *Is he embarrassed?*

The fact that he'd been able to continuously grow his business was nothing short of amazing.

"Anyway, I'll be counting on your hard work from here on out too," he continued. "Can you handle it?" His attitude had flipped on his head, and he was observing my reaction with a faint air of meekness.

"At our currently agreed upon quantities, I can keep the deliveries coming for

as long as you want them. If anything, you're doing me a favor."

"That's good to hear," Camilo said, and we traded smiles.

Regardless of how exceptional the weapons we forged were, there was always a finite limit to demand. To put it in extreme terms, if every citizen in the kingdom owned one knife each, we would no longer be able to sell our knives here. Realistically speaking, that would never happen, but demand was bound to decrease, at least gradually. The products we sold were consumable goods, but they were hardly going to break in a month or two.

Therefore, our only option was to seek out new markets. The empire...was going to be occupied for the foreseeable future, so if we wanted to expand our sales, the most obvious choice was the republic, a nation which also bordered the kingdom.

After pleasantries, Camilo moved on to the purpose of our visit. "The hoes are the only inventory you have for me today, right?"

"Yeah. There're a little more than fifty," I responded.

"Reliable as always."

Camilo looked over at the head clerk, who nodded and exited the room to check the quantity and quality of our goods, both of which I had complete confidence in. I'd crafted the hoes with my cheats, so they should stand out from the other goods on the market. I wasn't particularly worried.

"By the way, about the empire..." Camilo brought this up casually, as if the subject had just now come to mind.

Helen was seated next to me today, and I felt her stiffen. I reached out underneath the table and took her hand in mine.

"All is unfolding more or less exactly how the count previously explained," he stated.

"So, the rebellion has been suppressed, the emperor is reforming the government, and peace is being restored?" I asked, trying to confirm.

He nodded. "That about covers it. But...the situation is still a mess."

Since the empire was a neighboring nation, it was far from being a foreign

land. Regardless of the fact that we'd been obligated to infiltrate it, I still hoped the turmoil would die down relatively quickly. Needless to say, certain sacrifices might have to be made for that to happen...

"Well, the uprisings are still considered recent news after all," I pointed out.

It hadn't been that long since the initial unrest. If the empire bounced back too quickly, word would get out that the insurrection had been nothing more than a small thorn in the empire's side. It was thus necessary to drag out the cleanup process along a plausible timeline while keeping the actual damages to a minimum.

In my eyes, the emperor was far from a celestial being, but I still felt a pang of sympathy when I considered the work that was ahead of him.

"Also, once everything settles down, Helen should be able to relax," said Camilo. "No point in sparking a fire after all is quiet again. I doubt there's anyone eager to invite the controversy Helen's testimony is sure to bring. Anyone left, that is."

"Her capture was originally just a show for the benefit of the emperor's subjects, right?"

"Yeah. It would've been unusual to simply let her escape, but at this point, they're just waiting for the right opportunity to revoke the decree."

Helen looked relieved. Diana and Rike both showed her their support too, saying, "Thank goodness."

Once the decree was canceled, Helen could return to being a mercenary. That would be good for her. At least, if that was what she wanted—she now had a home to come back to, after all.

With that settled, I changed the subject. "By the way, we're heading into the rainy season, correct? I want to put a pause on our deliveries for two, three weeks. Is that okay with you? We can visit once if that'll put you in a hard spot."

"Oh, right. It's already that time of year..." Camilo mumbled. "No, don't worry. We have plenty of other inventory to sell."

There was no pushback to my proclamation that we were planning to go

underground. It wasn't as if our weapons were the only wares Camilo carried.

Right at that moment, the head clerk returned, having completed his inspection. He met Camilo's gaze and nodded. I had been pretty sure our goods would meet the standard, but it was still nice to have confirmation.

"You came at just the right time," Camilo said to the clerk. "Can you make sure Eizo gets extra of all the supplies?" He smiled cheekily. "And see that he pays extra too."

The clerk must've been on the same page as Camilo, for he grinned as well and replied, "Understood," before running out again.

We had our own stockpile of supplies, but it was still a massive help to get replenishment for the three weeks we'd be holed up.

After that, we talked about the empire for a little longer. The people who had escaped the empire were slowly trickling back in (considering the circumstances, they were being let in without penalty), and there were merchants from the empire who'd resumed their business here in the kingdom. Apparently, the giants, a race who lived in great numbers in the empire's capital, could now be seen once in a while in these parts, though we hadn't run across any today.

All seemed to be settling down; however, a few of the people who'd come from the empire might've still been pursuing Helen, so we couldn't let down our guard just yet.

Soon, the head clerk came back. We took our proceeds for the day and then started to prepare for the trip home.

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"You don't have any special requests, right?" Camilo double-checked as we were leaving the conference room.

"No, just the usual," I answered.

He nodded. "Then I'll see you in three weeks."

"Yeah."

After shaking hands, we parted.

In the garden, the apprentice was playing with Lucy. We'd given him permission last time (which made it sound all official, but it hadn't been anything big), so he wasn't bothered when we appeared.

I hoped he would play with her even after she grew up, but she had been a wolf before becoming a magical beast, so I thought she might grow to be quite massive...

"As usual, thanks for looking after these kids." I passed him a tip for taking care of Krul and Lucy.

"Not at all," he responded.

This exchange too was slowly becoming part of our routine. Once he was promoted, would someone take his place? Until that time came, it was my pleasure doing business with him as well.

After hitching Krul to the cart, we put the shop behind us. Oppressive clouds hung over the city, and even the rowdy main road possessed a slightly somber atmosphere.

"It looks like it's going to rain," I said, peering up at the sky.

Samya turned her face upward and sniffed the air. Lucy mimicked Samya, her nose twitching as she did so. My shoulder's HP decreased slightly.

"It's not gonna pour, but it might drizzle," Samya concluded.

"Then once we're out of the city, let's hurry home."

When Rike heard Samya's prediction, she urged Krul to go faster. We hadn't prepared for rain, so we would be in a dicey position if the weather didn't hold. Considering that the rainy season was about to begin, we shouldn't have been so careless.

We left the city at a brisk pace and picked up even more speed on the road. Krul trilled happily as she ran. As long as we didn't encounter any problems, I thought it might be a good idea to travel at this speed all the time.

Along the way, we passed a few other horse-drawn carts flying down the road. It was amusing to see the travelers' reactions—just like other people we'd encountered previously, the common first response to our speed was

surprise...followed by understanding once they saw we had a drake hauling our cart.

Anyway, it was undeniable that our Krul was brilliant.

“Incidentally, why is there a rainy season?” I asked.

The seasons on Earth had been an effect of the sun’s rotation. However, since the laws of astronomy didn’t seem to apply in this world, what caused the seasons?

Lidy said, “Oh, that’s because...” before launching into an explanation.

Other than the sun god and the moon goddess, there were also goddesses of the earth and the clouds—just like back on Earth (though, whether Earth’s goddesses actually existed was another question). The sun god had many wives, one of whom was the earth goddess.

The sun was an orb of all the god’s blessings, and as it happened, those blessings not only befell the children of man, but also the earth goddess. In her happiness, she brought forth crops and plants. The reason produce was seasonal and very few things grew in winter was because the sun god’s blessings waxed and waned over the course of the year.

In addition, the cloud goddess occasionally filled the sky to undermine the earth goddess—who received benediction throughout the seasons—for she too was married to the sun god. “Why will you not bestow your blessings upon me?” she would ponder, and the tears she cried became rain.

The clouds were usually white, for the cloud goddess was pure and honest, but the more her negative emotions built, the darker the clouds would turn. This happened only occasionally, but once a year, she would get worked up and all her pent up feelings would come pouring out. That purge became the rainy season.

One always felt refreshed after a good cry. That was the same for everyone regardless of gender and apparently, regardless of the world you lived in. Similarly, the phrase “struck by lightning” was both a description of an actual phenomenon and an idiom, and it held the same meaning in both worlds.

After being rejuvenated by her cry, the cloud goddess would sweep away the

clouds. With her mood lifted, she would cast her own blessings upon the world's children, and thanks to her powers, the crops would grow ever more green and luscious.

Practically speaking, crops needed rain to grow, so the rain was actually a blessing in and of itself. However, if word of that ever reached the cloud goddess's ears, the rain clouds would grow even heavier.

In any case, the temperamental side of the gods and goddesses in this world made them resemble people. In my previous world, the Greek gods had possessed startlingly humanlike personalities as well. Maybe that was just how some gods were.

Though, it would've been too predictable if I incurred the wrath of the gods by saying any of that out loud...so I hid my thoughts away in my heart.

Right as we were about to enter the forest, I felt the first few drops of rain on my face. It was finally starting to fall.

That being said, this rain was the smallest of drizzles, so beneath the canopy of the trees, I hardly felt anything at all. The boughs formed a natural arcade.

"It's still bearable right now, but let's hurry," Samya urged. "The floodgates will open soon, and we don't want to be caught in the downpour."

Rike nodded. Krul chirruped, and we sped onward toward home.

We passed through the organic arcade and arrived back at the cabin. No trees grew in the clearing, so the light drizzle came fluttering down upon us.

After unhitching Krul, we unloaded the supplies, working quickly, doing our best to prevent them from getting wet. Despite our efforts, some of it still ended up damp (luckily, the seasonings and spices were safely stored in lidded jars), but everything would probably dry by the time we needed to use it.

We were wet too, but we ushered Krul and Lucy back into their hut first. In the meantime, Diana grabbed towels from the house, and we used them to tousle the two of them dry.

"Stay inside until it stops raining, okay?" I told them.

“Kululu.”

“Bark!”

They responded brightly in their own ways, as if to confirm they understood. I petted them as a reward.

Good girl. Good girl.

Krul licked my face, and Lucy wagged her tail.

After we'd tucked in the kids, we returned to the cabin and went to our rooms to towel off and change. This would've been the ideal time to warm up in a bath...if only we had one. I brewed a weak tea for us instead.

As we drank the tea, I suggested, “We should seize this opportunity to make something that'll store a ton of rainwater in one go.”

We wouldn't be able to use the water for drinking (we boiled the lake water for that), but we could still use it for other parts of our day-to-day life. We wouldn't even need anything fancy—it could be a side project.

“Seems convenient, but won't the water degrade if it sits for too long?” Lidy asked. She was our resident agriculturist after all.

“I don't plan for us to drink it, but you're right. It would be a problem if the water went bad.”

Lidy nodded. “It could become a breeding ground for illnesses.”

That was true. Cisterns could breed bacteria, and we could fall sick if we weren't careful. At the end of the day, this *was* unsterilized rainwater we were talking about.

“All right, let's keep it small—something just big enough for two to three days,” I decided. “And we should build in a way to drain it.”

Lidy nodded in agreement. “That sounds reasonable.”

It'd be a waste to store water we couldn't use. Our best option was to build something that would let me decrease the number of trips to the lake...without being overambitious.

“We can't forget about the covered terrace either,” I added.

“Ah,” Diana said in a joking tone, “the long-awaited dawn of the oddball house in the woods is here.”

Our cabin was already unusual for its location alone, and adding a terrace was only going to further that reputation.

“But it’s a pain not to have one, especially when it comes to laundry, no?” I remarked.

“Won’t the clothes dry if we hang them in the forge?” Rike asked.

The workshop was not only hot, but dry—thanks to that, even meat dried quickly...as far as I could tell.

“Well, they’ll dry, but clothes aren’t expendable like the meat,” I pointed out. “Just imagining losing our entire wardrobe in a fire gives me shivers.”

The lard in meat *could* catch fire, but since we’d be able to hear the sizzling fat, it likely wouldn’t go unnoticed. Fabric wouldn’t go up in flames so easily, but it was certainly more flammable than raw meat. On top of that, we could always hunt more meat, but clothing was a precious commodity. Unlike my previous world, fabric (much less *clothing*) was not available in great supply.

“In the worst case, we’d have to go without a change of clothing or underwear for a month. Wouldn’t that be a bit tough?” I had little awareness of things like fashion or clothing, but even I would find such a scenario difficult to bear.

“That’s true...” Diana murmured.

“A change of clothing is one thing,” said Helen, “but no underwear...”

As a mercenary, Helen would’ve run into situations where she’d been unable to change, so she could likely put up with wearing the same clothing for a short time. However, it seemed that going without fresh clothing for too long would inconvenience even her.

“Hmmm,” Samya mused. “I don’t want that either.”

Samya wasn’t the type to be finicky about her lifestyle, but in these last few months—particularly because she’d been spending so much time with Rike and Diana—she’d come to appreciate creature comforts too. It was similar to how,

once you experienced the magic that was a bidet, you could never go back to a simple toilet.

Since we'd now gone over everything, I summarized our discussion. "Okay—the terrace is our top priority. The cistern is secondary."

We finished drawing up our plans before dinner. The next few weeks would be busy, but I couldn't help but get excited when I thought about the fact that we were upgrading the house. I looked forward to the days ahead.

###

The next morning after washing up, we gathered by the wood stockpile and finished the chores. Krul and Lucy came too, even though they might not have entirely understood what was happening.

"Our first order of business is to pick logs to use for the terrace's pillars," I declared.

"Yesterday's rain complicated things," said Rike.

I nodded. We couldn't use soggy wood to build the foundation. Since the rain had been light, the wood wasn't soaked, but we still had to take precautions.

Fortunately, the trees in this forest grew straight upward—although, in the case of the terrace, a slight curve would only enhance the atmosphere. For our purposes, as long as the wood was long enough and dry, any of them would do.

We all called back and forth as we split up to search for good candidates for our pillars.

"This one looks solid," I said.

"How about this one?" Samya asked.

"Yeah, good pick."

We selected eight in total, and I decided that would be enough.

"Where are we gonna build it?" wondered Samya.

"Hmmm, where indeed?" I pondered her question.

The courtyard has our garden—Lidy has really outdone herself there. I don't want to ruin her efforts.

“What about at the far end of the hallway?” I suggested. “It’s still empty.”

“It is, but...” Diana paused.

“But...?” I urged her to continue. “What is it?”

“What are we going to do when we need to add more rooms?” she asked.

“Why would we need to do that?”

The others, Diana included, stared at me. I knew what they were thinking even if they didn’t say it out loud.

“Well...*if* that time comes, we can build it perpendicular to the others,” I said by way of compromise. “In the worst-case scenario, we’ll build over the vegetable plot.”

Everyone sighed, but it looked like they weren’t going to argue further, so we got to work.

We split into two teams: Rike, Diana, Helen, and I would dig the holes for the pillars. The other two were in charge of stripping the bark.

We diggers grabbed shovels and the debarkers took up sickles. Other than Helen, we all had experience with the work, so by noon, we were mostly finished.

In the afternoon, we proceeded to install the pillars. This was Krul’s time to shine.

“We’re counting on you, Krul,” I told her.

“*Kuluuu!*”

We fastened a length of rope to one of the pillars and tied the other end to Krul who, with one great heave, walked forward. Lucy skipped in circles around Krul, barking away as if to say, “Go, go, Big Sis!”

Krul hauled the pillar straight to our construction site in one go. She was, after all, strong enough to pull the cart without strain, even when it was burdened by all of us riders and a mountain of miscellaneous goods. The cart was on wheels, but it was nevertheless an impressive feat.

“Keep going, keep going, aaand stop!” I directed.

Krul did as I instructed. From there, we moved the pillar to the edge of the pit using man power. Rike and I alone were plenty, but this time we had Helen helping out as well, so we had no problems carrying it over.

Then, we borrowed Krul's strength again to tip the pillar into the hole. She nudged it slowly and carefully until the end of it dipped in, and we stood it up. We used to do all of this ourselves, but Krul had been a big help ever since she'd come to live with us.

We finished installing the pillar in no time, and the final step was to pile the dirt back into the hole. Lucy joined in and kicked the dirt with her rear legs. The amount of dirt she actually moved was minuscule, but it was the thought that counted. Afterward, I petted both Krul and Lucy to thank them.

There were eight pillars, so we repeated the same steps eight times.

At the end of the day, I gazed upon our work and said, "Even with just the pillars up, I feel like I can see what it'll look like."

Our house had been turned into a construction site many times (though I'd been absent once), but I was always awed by the sight.

Having completed the beginnings of the terrace, we stopped working for the day.

Tomorrow, we'll have to check the condition of the soil. If it softens overnight, we'll have to compact it down again before laying the floor and roof.

While everything was still fresh in our minds, we hammered out the rest of our plans.

The sun dyed our surroundings a fiery orange. Against the golden backdrop, the image of my family and I relaxing on our terrace overlapped with the eight pillars, standing tall and proud.

###

The next day, we moved on to laying the diagonal braces, joists, ridge beam, and rafters.

When we checked, the ground around the pillars was still stable, and the pillars showed no wobble. The soil around the clearing was hard to begin with,

and we had compacted it further when we'd buried the pillars. Just in case, we tamped down the soil around our foundations one more time with a log, the goal being to remove as much air as possible and prevent rot. Soil wasn't the same as ground meat, and tamping the ground wasn't the same as making a burger patty, but I felt reassured nonetheless.

Since we were constructing a terrace and didn't need walls, we only braced the base of the pillar. It wouldn't be strong enough to withstand an earthquake, but I conveniently chose to overlook that fact. It was just a terrace.

Besides, I'd been told that there hadn't been any major earthquakes in several centuries. In my previous life, I'd experienced several, though. In any case, we would cross that bridge if we got there.

We left Samya and Helen in charge of making the joists and floorboards. The rest of us were completing the installation.

"Eizo went all out to make this saw," Samya told Helen. "It sinks right through the logs!"

"Really? Whoa...you're right." Helen gave a surprised chuckle. "Ha ha! What the heck is this?"

"It's so sharp you can't help but laugh. That was my first reaction too."

Their review of the saw I'd made was a little offbeat, but I was happy as long as they were having fun with the work.

As we continued with the work, we made sure to pick planks from our stock that looked usable. Lidy and I started on the floor. The roof would be handled by Rike, who was surprisingly spry, and Diana (she was good at tree climbing apparently, though why a noble-born lady would have such a skill set was a question best left unasked). Normally, lifting the wooden beams into the air was hard work, but thanks to Krul, Rike and Diana didn't have any problems.

"Be careful not to fall!" I cautioned them.

"Okaaay!" they called back.

Technically, they had scaffolding to stand on, but it was bare bones. Even so, they moved with comfort and ease, maybe because their physical ability was

high to begin with. Krul raised the ridge beam and rafters to them, and they installed everything.

In the meantime, Lidy and I worked on the foundation. Using the Japanese-style nails I'd crafted previously, we laid diagonal beams between the pillars. A mortise and tenon joint was a more elaborate way to connect pieces of wood, but we didn't use them this time around. After the beams were in place, we layered the joists on top.

By the end of the day, we had finished a roof (minus the shingles) and a floor (sans the boards). The resulting structure matched with the rest of the cabin, but if it hadn't been for the scaffolding, it would've looked like a crumbling detached room rather than a work-in-progress. It wasn't often that one would build a terrace as an addition.

In any case, the construction was taking less time than I'd thought it would.

At this rate, we should be able to complete it tomorrow.

And so, the next day, having finished cutting the logs, Samya and Helen joined the rest of us to lay the shingles and flooring.

The construction site resonated with the satisfying rhythm of our work. Though the sounds were different from the clanking and tinkering of smithing, they were fascinating in their own way.

Then, a sharp "*Ouch!*" broke through the rhythm. I glanced to see Helen with a fierce scowl on her face. She had been hammering the floorboards, and apparently, she'd struck her own fingers.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't put a lot of power into it."

"Let me see."

I took her hand and examined it. Like she had said, the place she'd hit wasn't even red.

In that case, there shouldn't be any problems.

Nonetheless, I told her, "Say something if it starts to hurt."

“G-Got it...” she replied quietly.

I suspected that she was hiding the pain, but I returned to my work.

At the end of the day, I hammered the final nail into the final floorboard and shouted, “We’re done!”

The others clapped. Krul stuck her head in from outside and cooed, “*Kuu.*” Lucy bounded around excitedly.

The terrace was complete. The construction had been simplified by the fact that we didn’t have to erect any walls. It had still taken all of us three days to finish it though, so it wasn’t the kind of project we could take on at the drop of a hat.

It’s not so easy to add expansions to the cabin.

The whole family began chatting excitedly about plans for our new terrace.

“Now we can enjoy fresh air, even if it rains nonstop,” Samya remarked.

“And we can dry laundry,” added Rike.

“Shall we move a bench in later?” suggested Diana.

“Can I raise seedlings that can’t handle heavy rain here?” Lidy wondered.

“Wow,” said Helen. “The breeze feels great.”

“*Arf! Arf!*”

I stroked Krul. “Good girl. Good work.”

It’ll be nice if relaxing out here becomes another part of our family routine.

###

Now that the terrace was complete, our next project was the cistern, but it didn’t need to be all-hands-on-deck.

Like Samya had said, we needed to hunt at least once this week, so she organized a hunting party including herself, Diana, Lidy, and Helen. Everyone was armed with the composite bows I’d crafted before, except for Helen, who was using Samya’s old bow. Because of her previous work as a mercenary,

Helen's archery experience was more than *zero*, but Samya and Lidy were still going to be teaching her as they went.

I'll have to make a composite bow for Helen one of these days. Though, it'll have to be sturdier to account for her strength.

Lucy went with them too. She could be a major asset to the hunts if she picked up a few tricks, and if the pup were to try something reckless, she would still obey any warnings. Lucy's tail wagged excitedly.

She...She will listen, right?

I voiced my doubts aloud. In response, Diana said, "I've heard that hunting dogs are trained when they're puppies, so it should be fine, no? Lucy's clever too."

Having Mama Diana's stamp of approval, I decided not to worry.

Diana looked like the mythical goddess with a bow in one hand and a wolf by her side. That said, the wolf in question was still a pup, which threw off the image slightly. Plus, Diana was only wearing rough-hewn clothing that was appropriate for hunting.

"Anyway, be careful out there," I told the party of four as I bid them farewell.

"Will do. See you later." Samya waved as they left.

After they were gone, Rike and I started on the cistern. The first step was to put together the base by laying down planks fitted together with tongue and groove joints. The slots and protrusions were carved into the flanks similar to the way floorboards were sometimes made in my previous world.

I made the tongues slightly fatter and used a wooden mallet to hammer them into the grooves. Provided that the wood was sufficiently dry to begin with, it would expand when soaked with water, ensuring that the planks lock together tightly. Though it was impossible to make the cistern completely watertight, this design would help to prevent leaks.

The cistern was also liable to break if it was too wide. It required some finesse to get the measurements right, but luckily, cisterns were considered essential equipment for a forge, so my blacksmithing cheats helped me out. Including the

quenching step, water was used throughout the forging process, so a cistern was indispensable. The one currently in the workshop was hollowed out of stone.

Once we finished the base, the next steps were to install poles at the four corners, make the planks for the sides, and lay them horizontally between the poles.

Cisterns were usually cylindrical, their bodies formed of vertical planks and reinforced with metal bands (an example being the water tanks on the roofs of American buildings). This time, however, we decided to go the easy route and make a rectangular cistern instead.

I designed one part of the bottommost layer of planks to be slidable—this meant it could be moved aside and used to drain water. I took inspiration from the sluice gates used to bring water into rice paddies (but ours wasn't quite that fancy).

Although we had no other help, the two of us were both blacksmiths. Even with the add-ons, our skills—along with the smaller target size—meant we were able to finish by evening.

When we were done, we stepped back to observe our handiwork.

"This should do," I declared.

"It's big enough to hold plenty of water," said Rike.

If we'd wanted to use the water inside for drinking, we would've needed to install a lid that would prevent leaves from falling inside. But, for chores and the like, the cistern wouldn't need a cover. We just left it open.

I had considered installing a pipe on the roof leading down to the cistern, but I decided against it for now. Since it really poured during the rainy season, the pipe would get good use, but during other seasons, rain came only occasionally. If we changed our minds, we'd have time to install a gutter later.

"It reminds me of a barrel bath," I remarked.

Rike turned to me. "Northern-style baths look like this?"

"Yeah. You fill it up with hot water and submerge yourself."

“Wow, it sounds like a hot spring for your home.”

“What does your family do?” I asked.

“My family’s habits aren’t so different from how we wash up here,” she explained. “Oh, but sometimes we go to the mountains to soak in hot springs. They’re effective for injuries.”

That was right—her family forge was located near a mine, so there must’ve been natural springs in the area.

“I haven’t heard of any hot springs around here though,” I said.

“Me either. I asked Samya about it before, but she said she didn’t know of any springs with hot water.”

“I see...”

In my previous life, I showered rather than bathed, so it wasn’t like I missed having long soaks in the tub. That said, as a former Japanese person, I still had the urge to relax in a hot bath once in a while.

Plus, now I earned my living by slaving away in the scorching heat of the forge. Blacksmithing was certainly a sweaty trade. A long soak in piping-hot water would be most welcome.

Rike—and possibly Diana too—knew how heavenly a nice bath was. I wanted to introduce that feeling to all the others. Perhaps this was a sign that I should accelerate my plans to build a proper family bath.

While I was still wrapped up in my thoughts, Krul ambled out from her hut. The hunting party must’ve returned.

Rike and I finished up and quickly cleaned everything so we could greet everyone at the door.

###

After we cleaned up, Rike and I went out to meet everyone, with Krul along for the ride.

“You’re back,” I called out, while Rike said, “Welcome home.”

Helen looked tired, but none of the others had a hair out of place.

I smiled and told Helen, “Judging by how tired you look, I’m guessing your quarry gave you quite the runaround.”

Lucy padded up to me, and I patted her on the head. She was just a puppy, but she’d spent an entire day out with the hunting party and still had energy. What amazing stamina.

In contrast, Helen, having depleted her energy reserves, sat down heavily on the ground, a grimace on her face. “I’m beat...” she groaned. “Why aren’t the rest of you dying?”

“Samya’s always lived here, and Lidy’s familiar with forest terrain since she’s an elf. She’s been living with us for some time now too,” I answered. “Don’t let her looks fool you. Tomboys like her don’t have stamina problems.”

My statement earned me a beating from Lidy, who’d slipped up next to me when I wasn’t paying attention. However, compared to Diana’s assaults that immediately drained my shoulder’s HP, Lidy’s punches to my back barely hurt.

“As for Diana... Well, you already know how she is, right?”

Like Lidy, Diana was a tomboy. She’d been building her stamina gradually while living here. Before she had a bow, she used to be the beater on these hunts.

“Is that right...?” Helen grumbled. She flopped down where she sat, turning her face up toward the sky.

“At least call me quick to adapt,” Diana protested, her tone sulky. However, she couldn’t keep up the act for long and burst out laughing.

The rest of us laughed too, and the sound of our mirth filled up the clearing, intermingled with Krul’s coos and Lucy’s barks.

“Why don’t you dust off and come eat dinner?” I said.

My suggestion was met with shouts of agreement, and we all headed back into the cabin.

The next morning, we set off for the lake together. Not everyone was needed for the task ahead, but as far as I was concerned, our excursion was like a casual picnic.

Along the way, Samya sniffed the air. Intrigued, Lucy followed suit.

“Hmmm, I knew it,” Samya murmured. “It’s almost here.”

“The rain?” I asked.

“Yeah. Starting from tomorrow or so.”

Lucy barked in accord with Samya’s answer. Diana lifted the wolf pup and rubbed her head. Lucy’s tail wagged from side to side.

So the rainy season would start tomorrow... Our preparations were just in time. If we realized we were missing anything later on, we’d have to make do without it this time around.

“There isn’t a rainy season in the north, right?” Samya asked. “Or is there?”

“There is,” I replied. “It’s a little different from the weather here, though. More humid.”

High humidity was a characteristic of Asia (to use my previous world as my example). Apparently, that was the same in the northern region of this world. Climate had a great influence on a region’s culture, so it was only natural that the Japan-like region here also had similar weather patterns.

“I’ve never been to the north,” Helen admitted, her hands laced behind her head.

As a former mercenary, she was the most well traveled out of everyone in the family. If she’d never been to the north, then it was unlikely anyone else had either.

“Nobles from the north have paid visits to my family before,” said Diana. There was probably no shortage of foreign aristocrats wanting to visit the count and his family. It was hardly surprising that a portion of them came from the north.

“They must’ve been wearing strange outfits, right?” I inquired.

“Yes, that’s right. I was really young at the time, so it left a deep impression on me.”

Since they had been traveling from far away, the Eimoor’s northern guests

wouldn't have worn formal attire like the *kamishimo* samurai used to wear. My guess was that they'd worn loose-fitting pants like a *tattsuke hakama* with a long-sleeved or short-sleeved kimono and a *haori* jacket on top. It wasn't like they could've worn armor and helmets for a social visit.

"Did you used to wear that kind of clothing too, Eizo?" Samya asked.

It was probably just an offhanded question on her part, but living in modern Japan, I'd rarely gotten the chance to wear traditional clothing. Even for my coming-of-age ceremony, I'd worn a suit.

The exception was whenever I'd stayed over at my grandfather's house—he'd preferred Japanese clothing to western clothing, so he always had me wear a yukata (well, I assumed so, but it could have been a kimono made for kids).

"Hmmm, my grandfather made me wear those types of clothes, but the rest of my family prefers southern-style clothing..." I decided to leave it at that. It wasn't a complete lie.

A quizzical look crossed Samya's face, but she quickly accepted my answer.

"I want to go one day if I can. I want to visit your hometown."

It wasn't clear who had uttered the statement, and the words were soon whisked away by the wind.

We arrived at the shores of the lake.

When I saw the deer, I exclaimed "Whoa!" without meaning to. "It's massive!"

Previously, I'd helped drag one of Samya's two-meter catches out of the lake...but this deer was even bigger. In my previous world, moose could apparently grow to three meters tall, but this deer the hunters had caught must have easily been four.

"I know, right?" Samya boasted proudly with a satisfied huff. "It wasn't easy."

"That's why we took so long yesterday. Because it's so big," Diana said.

As yesterday's events came flooding back, Helen's face drained of color. "We didn't accidentally kill the Lord of the Forest, did we?"

Samya scoffed. “Don’t be silly. As if it’d be a deer.”

Her answer implied that another species could very well be the Lord of the Forest. For the time being, I decided not to press further.

We tied the giant deer to Krul with a length of rope. She snorted loudly, ready for action, and took one heavy step forward.

Normally, she was able to pull Samya and the other’s catches in one fluid motion, but even Krul had to put her back into hauling the giant deer. Nevertheless, she managed to haul it onto shore without getting stuck.

In the meantime, Rike and the others had chopped down a tree to make a carrying platform. We all worked together to load the deer onto it. Even with all of us pitching in, the deer still weighed a ton. Part of it was meat, but because of its bigger size, its hide was also heavier than an average deer’s because of all of the extra hair. In turn, there’d be more water soaked into its hide, which would’ve definitely affected the overall weight.

We heaved the body onto the pallet. Krul cooed, “*Kuluuu*,” and she surged forward, full of energy.

What can I say? Our little drake just really loves hauling things around.

Once we got home, we strung the deer up in a tree and skinned it. Its weight made it difficult for us to lift, but breaking it down went smoothly since we divided the work among four of us instead of two.

Afterward, I petted Krul and showered her with praise. She looked pleased but soon headed back into her hut, her footsteps heavy. She must have been worn out.

“With a deer this size, it looks like we’re not going to run out of food anytime soon,” I said.

Because the deer had been massive, suffice to say, we were able to get a lot of meat. If they were going to be hunting animals this size on the regular, I would have to consider building a proper smokehouse.

For lunch, I served up some fresh venison, lightly grilled as usual. For Lucy, I prepared an unseasoned serving, which I served her only after it was cool. She’d

worked hard yesterday (mostly running around, but just her being there was enough), so I rewarded her with big and thick slices of meat. Her tail didn't stop moving for even a second as she ate.

Evening fell.

I had special plans for dinner.

To tell the truth, at noon, I'd set aside some of the venison to marinate in a mixture of soy sauce, miso, and liquor (shame that it wasn't sake). And now, I grilled up the marinated meat. It gave off a satisfying sizzle as it hit the pan—a mouthwatering scent, one near and dear to me, filled the air.

"What an unusual smell," Lidy said, peeking over my shoulder. I hadn't noticed her coming up behind me until she'd spoken.

"That's the soy sauce and miso. They're both made of soybeans and wheat," I explained.

"I see. Well, I think it smells delicious." Contrary to the stereotype, elves weren't vegetarian, but Lidy still had a slight preference for vegetables over meat. This type of seasoning might be just to her taste.

When the meat was almost ready, everyone gathered around the table. Tonight's menu was miso grilled venison served with a side of flatbread and vegetable soup.

Dinner marked the bombshell debut of Japanese dishes to our regular lineup. I'd debated whether to make the vegetable soup into a miso soup, but I wasn't sure how everyone would like the miso, so I shelved the idea. One of these days, when Camilo is able to procure kombu kelp and dried bonito flakes for me, I would try and make it.

I peered around at the others. No one seemed to be turned off by the scent at least. Miso and soy sauce were both fermented products, and some people simply couldn't stand the smell. Fortunately, none of my family belonged to that camp.

Everyone besides me brought a slice of the miso venison to their mouth.

As I watched them chew, I nervously asked, "H-How does it taste?" The last

time I was this nervous was decades ago, the day the results of my certification exam came out.

“Delicious!” Samya exclaimed. Everyone else nodded too.

Diana added, “It’s a little salty, but it’s good.”

Reviews from the others were generally positive as well. I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

I took a bite. Since I hadn’t possessed all the proper ingredients, it tasted like something was missing. Nevertheless, the familiar taste of miso and soy sauce filled my mouth, and that alone was satisfying enough.

The one fatal flaw—there was no rice! It was surely cultivated in the north, but I couldn’t imagine how much it’d cost to import. I’d have to consult Camilo at some point.

We polished off our dinner, chatting excitedly about northern ingredients and seasonings as the hour grew late.

###

The day after I treated everyone to miso, I woke up to find that the mood had changed and the soundtrack was different. Instead of the sound of the rushing wind, I heard water.

It was raining.

I sat up and dragged myself out of bed, then changed into my usual outfit and left my room.

It was dark. We didn’t have a clock, so I couldn’t be sure precisely what time it was, but I should’ve woken up around the same time as usual. Craftsmen always rose strictly according to schedule. At least, that was a personal stereotype of mine. My father had been like that too.

I could see outside from the window, so there was no real need for me to double-check. Nevertheless, I unlatched the door and stepped outside. The rain was falling down in sheets, soaking into the ground. Strangely, the air wasn’t humid like I was used to, but rather, sharp and cold.

The normally lush and green leaves on the trees, grass, and flowers were also

speckled with raindrops. They bowed heavily toward the ground as if to represent the dreary mood. The tree trunks were black, wet with the rain, and the gloomy forest was even more dismal than usual.

I should've replenished our water supply yesterday, so I didn't have to go out today. Had I filled the cistern we'd just finished building, we would've had enough water for two or three days!

"Damn," I cursed under my breath.

But there was no use crying over spilled milk. I had no choice but to trek through the rain.

So, I carried the water jugs from the cabin. Krul and Lucy, who normally waited for me outside, were nowhere to be seen.

Well, we should be fine even without the extra water Krul helps me carry.

I was just about to head out by myself when Krul came flying from her hut.

"You don't have to come with me," I reassured her. "It's raining after all."

"*Kululululululu*," she trilled, rubbing her head against me as if to say, "No way!"

I sighed and slung the jugs over Krul's shoulders as usual. Krul chirruped happily, "*Kululuuu*."

"Good girl. Let's go."

As for Lucy, she was sprawled by the entrance of the hut. She didn't appear to have any desire to go outside in the rain.

"Watch the house for me, okay?" I told her.

Lucy huffed.

Since it was raining and the weather was different than usual, maybe she and Krul had divided the work between themselves. The low atmospheric pressure, if that was a concept in this world, might have been taking a toll on her as well.

Krul and I trudged through the rainfall into the forest. The soggy ground made it harder to walk, but we were still relatively light on our feet. Krul never slipped or misstepped.

The canopy sheltered us from the downpour, but raindrops slid down the leaves to plop on our heads. Krul seemed to find the sensation ticklish at first. However, she gradually grew used to it and was soon walking through the rain perfectly at ease.

At the lake, I dipped the jugs into the water one by one. The rain cast ripples on the lake's surface. Because the lake had a large surface area, if it continued to rain, the water levels were likely to increase significantly. It would be wise to avoid the river for the time being.

"We're not going to wash up here today," I said to Krul.

"*Kulu*," she replied, dipping her head as if she were nodding. She must've already guessed, having been subjected to the showers on the way here.

After filling up the four jugs, we beat a hasty retreat. We rushed home, the rain beating down on us all the way back. The situation was similar to when I'd forgotten my umbrella in my previous world, but strangely, I didn't feel miserable the way I always had back then.

"It must be because Krul's here with me," I murmured.

Krul nuzzled me with her head. Maybe she had overheard me.

Back at the cabin, I brought the jugs into the house as quickly as I could. Samya and Rike were already awake, so they brought me a towel (or more accurately, a soft, woven, linen-like cloth).

I took the towel and hurried back to the hut.

Krul was standing, waiting for me. She must've known I'd come wipe her off and that sitting down would dirty the floor.

"Who's a clever little lady," I said as I dried her with the towel.

She trilled back, "*Kulululu*," and I could tell that she was in a buoyant mood.

As a member of the lizard family, Krul had no hair or fur. She was already drier than I had expected, and I finished wiping her down quickly.

"Be a good girl and stay in the hut today," I instructed.

Krul cooed to show that she understood (probably).

I checked the floor of the hut. It was nothing fancy, but at least it was higher than the ground. The elevation (slight as it was) must have helped since I didn't see any signs of the water seeping in at the moment.

"Okay, I'm heading back."

"Arf!"

As long as she was in the forest, Krul could get by without hardly anything to eat, but Lucy was different. Maybe she was going through a growth spurt, or maybe she just liked eating with us. Whatever the reason, I had to bring her back with me.

I covered Lucy with the towel I'd used to dry Krul, and we sprinted to the cabin.

We'd made the unfortunate decision of building the hut away from the main house. Later on, we could either rebuild it attached to the cabin or construct a covered passageway. If we chose the latter, we'd have to make sure the roof was tall enough for Krul to walk without hitting her head.

I ducked back into the cabin and gave Lucy to Samya. Nestled in Samya's arms, Lucy was cheerful, and her tail swished back and forth.

Mama Diana's going to be jealous if you turn the charm up too high.

Rike prepared a dry towel for me, which I took back into my room. I stripped off my wet clothing and toweled off.

It's impossible to keep wearing these clothes, huh?

I took out a change of clothing from my admittedly limited closet. The dry clothes made me feel clean and refreshed.

Afterward, I prepared breakfast as usual. We usually brought Lucy into the house around the time I finished cooking, but she'd joined up considerably earlier today. She watched everyone finish the chores and laundry with interest.

With such an adorable cheerleader at their side, Diana and Helen were washing the clothing with more enthusiasm than usual. I finished cooking faster than I normally would, so I helped hang my clothes out to dry. I couldn't help with the women's clothing—that would be crossing a line—but I had no

problem drying my own.

We hung the laundry on the newly constructed terrace.

“I’m happy to see it immediately put to use,” I remarked.

“Yeah, it’s a big help,” replied Rike. She was in charge of the laundry...and all our other household chores. After all, she had the most experience, even if it was only from living with her family.

Helen was also proficient at housework to some extent. When I’d asked her about it, she’d responded, “I helped out back at home. And on the front lines, we had to seize whatever chance we got to wash our clothes as thoroughly as possible.”

Samya wasn’t particularly skilled, but she knew all the basics. Lidy was the same. Diana was...well, I tended to turn a blind eye on that front, so I won’t elaborate.

Nevertheless, while Diana had been quite slow at first, as of late, she no longer needed so much time. She’d been a quick learner to begin with.

Normally, we would put Lucy outside after breakfast, but since it was raining, we let her stay in the cabin for a while longer.

I opened the discussion about our plans. “So, what should we forge today?”

“Why not work on our normal lineup of goods as usual?” Rike suggested.

“We don’t have any commissions we’re working on at the moment...” We *could* spend today the way we always did, but we weren’t due for a delivery for another three weeks. We had plenty of time. “Shall I try making something new?” I mused.

Rike’s face lit up. I smiled drily at her obvious enthusiasm as I opened the door to the workshop.

“So? What are you going to make?” asked Rike, openly enthusiastic. Nearby, Samya watched her with fond exasperation.

I had three options: First, we could iterate upon the weapons I’d already made. Second, we might forge a completely new type of weapon. And third, we could make something other than a weapon.

Armor would likely be time-consuming to make (according to my cheats), so I tabled the idea for now. Though, if I had a longer stretch of free time in the next three weeks, I might be able to make a breastplate for Diana or Helen.

When it came to tools, I'd forged sickles soon after I'd come here. Other than that, there were only the prong hoes we'd made recently. It wasn't a bad idea to expand my horizons on that front.

However, what I really wanted to do was to forge a weapon. The last time I'd asked Helen, she'd said that she was most proficient with her shortswords, but she could also wield one-handed weapons. This time, I wanted to make a new weapon and have her try it out for me.

Swords, knives, javelins, spears, halberds, bows—I've made normal weapons, ones with long reaches, and projectiles.

"Maybe a mace this time," I muttered.

Up to this point, I hadn't yet made any blunt weapons. A flange mace would be able to contend with heavy armor.

Though...personally, I thought that if I made full use of my cheats, I could take down an enemy armored to the gills even without a mace. However, what I could and couldn't do was not the point.

When Helen returned one day to her original profession, the mace could serve as her backup weapon. It would be extra weight for her to carry, but a mace could pack a punch even with damaged flanges. It was worth having on hand if it increased the chances of her survival, however fractionally.

I had to ask Helen for her opinion first, and that's exactly what I did.

She answered, "Hmmm, let me think. It'll slow me down if it's too heavy. But...the swords you made me won't last forever, so it would be better to have a secondary weapon ready."

Since the swords were made of appoitakara, I figured that they might actually last several decades. Still, there was no guarantee of that.

"Then it's settled. Today, I'll make a mace," I declared.

"Wow..." Rike's eyes shone, her anticipation rising.

It's just a mace...? Its design is super-duper simple, you know?

Nonetheless, she said she wanted to observe, and I let her do as she pleased. The others were going to be making metal plates.

I started on the flanges that comprised the head and radiated out of the shaft. They could be a variety of shapes, but I kept my design bare bones and decided to make it curved like a mountain.

First, I heated plate metal on the firebed. I made them slightly thicker than I wanted them to be, so the plate ended up being much bigger than my target size. After reheating the plate, I used a chisel to divide it. From one large plate, I made three smaller ones. Then, I repeated the process twice more for a total of nine smaller pieces of metal.

After heating up one of the small pieces, I hammered it out on the anvil. I shaped it to look like a slightly pointier version of Mt. Fuji, though I elongated the slope leading up to the tip so that it was about as long as two stacked fists were tall. As I shaped it, I imbued it with magic to make the metal harder.

Once shaped, it was ready to be used, but since I had the opportunity (and at Helen's request), I chiseled some decorative carvings as well. That said, all I did was engrave our forge insignia—the sitting fat cat—into the metal, making sure I wouldn't compromise the sturdiness of the weapon by carving too deeply. It took time to finish the relief, but the end result was pleasing to look at.

Once I was done, Rike picked up the completed flange and inspected it carefully.

"It's quite solid," she remarked.

"It's going to be part of a mace after all. My number one priority was to make it hard and sturdy."

Since I'd reinforced the metal with magic, it wouldn't break easily the way it would have had I made the steel itself harder. When you made steel stronger, it was likely to become brittle.

Rike muttered to herself as she looked at the flange. "Hmmm, this should hold up, I think? But wait..."

Smiling ruefully at her antics, I slid another metal piece into the fire to start forging the next flange.

I made nine pieces in total, all of them perfectly uniform with no deviance in measurement.

“Aaah, this precision is a trademark of your work, Boss,” gushed Rike.

“You think?” I replied. “It’s nothing other blacksmiths can’t do.”

A veteran smith should be able to forge with a great degree of precision. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to make helmets and armor, which required joining complex pieces together with confidence and fluidity of motion.

“If we’re talking about ‘almost’ the same level, then my father has a similar degree of skill,” Rike said, stacking the nine flanges. “However, it’d be impossible for him to shape the metal perfectly without any trial and error, especially for an item he isn’t practiced at making. You can forge high-quality weapons even at a makeshift forge on a battlefield, right?”

“Maybe.”

But even I had my limits. When the front lines were in a region with little magic, I wouldn’t be able to imbue the metal, which would negatively impact the quality of the weapon. The final product might be good enough to qualify as an elite model, but just barely.

As Rike took her time scrutinizing the flanges, I moved on to making the grip and the handle where the flanges would attach.

I heated another plate of metal in the firebed. Once it reached the forging temperature, I hammered it into a rod. The handle had to be long, but not too long, lest it become unwieldy. I elongated the rod until it was of medium length. Helen was used to shortswords, so a shorter weapon was probably easier for her to use anyway.

When I was satisfied with the length, I heated a second plate to make an even slimmer rod. I wanted it to be strong enough that it would take effort to bend, so I made it thicker than a wire. It would wrap around the handle to form the grip.

“Rike, lend me a hand, will you?” I asked.

“My pleasure.”

If metal had the same properties as glass, I could have managed one way or another by myself, attaching and stretching it out while it was hot. But steel didn’t play so nicely. I considered heating it in the forge, but there was also the magic aspect to think about.

In the end, Rike helped me—using tongs, we wrapped the thin rod around the cooled handle. After a few times around, the metal cooled, so I had to reheat it before we repeated the process.

We continued until the grip was slightly longer than the width of my fist. As a finishing touch, to prevent the mace from slipping and flying from the user’s hand, I installed two thicker rings around the ends of the grip.

The last step was to attach the flanges. I heated up both the flange and the handle, then welded them together using a small hammer. Both pieces had to be held together while I hammered, so Rike helped me support them. If I ever wanted to produce maces en masse—not that I had any plans of doing so at the moment—I’d have to make a jig that would allow me to work alone.

Making smart use of the end of the anvil, I was able to attach all nine flanges.

“It’s done!” I exclaimed.

Rike’s eyes sparkled. “Cool!”

I casually swung the finished mace to test it. The head was a little heavy. That wasn’t a surprise, since I’d forged it that way on purpose, but perhaps I should have made the grip slightly heavier as a counterweight.

I showed it to Rike. She turned it all around to look at the construction in detail. “*Ho ho...*” she mumbled. “I see, I see...” She gave it a test swing just like I had.

Maces don’t really suit dwarves, huh? Or maybe it’s that axes and hammers suit them too perfectly.

I watched Rike experiment with the mace. It looked sturdy enough to withstand a good deal of force...to my eyes, at least. I wouldn’t know for sure

until I had Helen test it out for real.

So, just before the sun was about to set, I went out to the terrace with a scrap of leftover wood (from when we had made a scabbard or something) and a plate of metal. We closed up shop for the day, and everyone came out with me and Rike.

I handed the mace to Helen. She whirled it around with such vigor that the air seemed to vibrate. It didn't look like she was putting too much power into it, but the mace whirled around with ease. That was the difference in experience showing.

"It's the perfect weight. The head is a tad heavy, but it's manageable," Helen remarked.

"Good," I said, feigning composure. Inside, I was relieved. Samya must have guessed my secret, judging by her grin.

Diana and I held the wooden plank between us.

"At the risk of sounding redundant, don't hit us," I cautioned her with a smirk.

Helen scowled. "Of course."

She brought the mace up in one fluid motion and swung it sideways with all her strength. With an impressive crack, the plank splintered into minute pieces. The firmness and weight of the metal combined with Helen's technique and strength made for a menacing display.

To think that a single blow could exhibit such power and might...

One more thing had astonished me: I hadn't felt the impact of the blow at all. I looked over at Diana, and from the startled expression on her face, I knew she must not have felt anything either.

"L-Let's try the metal," I stuttered out.

"Y-Yeah," agreed Diana.

Nervously, we picked up the steel plate and raised it between us. We braced ourselves. Surely, we would feel the force of Helen's attack this time.

"Here I come," Helen announced casually.

She swung the mace around again. *Clang!* The clash of metal and metal was thunderous; sparks flew through the air. The impact vibrated through my hand, and I felt as if I'd taken a direct blow from the mace. Shocked, I dropped the plate. Diana did the same.

In other words, both of us had let go at the same time.

The heavy steel plate flew across the decidedly not-narrow terrace and crashed down on the other side.

I jogged over to it. The middle was completely misshapen. It looked like a halfway-formed EFP—an explosives formed penetrator.

“This is unbelievable,” I said, lifting up the plate with its bulging indent.

The plate had warped before it'd been pierced through. The metal *was* unprocessed, so it was soft to some degree, and Diana and I could only hold it steady to a certain extent. However, had the steel been hard and the plate held rigid, the mace might've punched right through, leaving a hole the shape of the flange behind.

“Will this be used to smash in helmets and breastplates? With all of someone's power behind it?” Rike asked, her eyes spinning and her voice somewhat strained. Everyone else was wide-eyed as well.

“That's what it's made for,” I replied.

I was stunned too but was able to respond with some degree of calm—I had faith in both my creation and Helen's strength. That said, I didn't want to imagine what would happen when the mace was turned against an actual person. That was the kind of scene that would make the food in your mouth turn to ash.

I turned to Helen. “This might not need asking, but what do you think?”

Instead of voicing her opinion, she gave me an enthusiastic two thumbs up. Then, she said, “My only request would be a loop of leather, a long one, at the end of the grip.”

“To swing the mace around with?” I asked.

“Right on the mark,” she answered. “And to slip around my wrist so I don't

drop it.”

“Aaah, that makes sense.”

In my previous world, I’d seen movies where hammers were swung around with both hands. It seemed a difficult technique to master, but nothing prevented a mace from being wielded like a flail...in theory.

“No problem. I’ll attach one for you,” I promised.

“Oh! There’s no rush!” Helen added, flustered.

The corner of my lips quirked up. “Sure, got it.”

After that, we went back inside, leaving the pitter-patter of rain behind us.

Before I cooked dinner for us, I first fed Lucy and had her return to the hut. When she dashed off, crossing the clearing in leaps and bounds, I figured she didn’t need me to accompany her. At the speed she was running, she would probably get only a little damp. Through the sound of the falling rain, I thought I heard Krul coo happily.

It was still raining the next morning, but it’d weakened considerably to a mere drizzle. There was a bit of water left over from the reserves I’d carried back yesterday, but better to replenish the supply while the rain was light. If it ended up pouring tomorrow, it’d be better not to go out.

Exiting the cabin, I ran over to Krul’s hut. I brought Krul’s share of the water jugs with me from the start this time, and when I tied them to Krul, she strode forward, radiating joy.

We filled the jugs at the lake and returned home to dry off, the same as yesterday. This time, we were barely wet, so the trip was easier... Well, that was what I expected, but surprisingly, I was wrong.

My mood was, however, improved by the lighter rainfall; I was already tired of trekking through downpours. I decided to believe that it was the correct decision to make the trip today. It would be a blow to my psyche if it ended up turning sunny tomorrow.

Back in the cabin, Rike and I discussed our upcoming work.

“I suppose we’ll be making our usual lineup of weapons for the foreseeable

future,” I said.

“Yes,” she agreed.

Since we couldn’t leave the house, our recreational picnics and outings would have to be put on hold too. If we focused on mass-producing what we needed for Camilo’s order, we could reduce the number of future trips into the city and take days off later. Plus, with Helen lending us a hand, we should be even more efficient. Regardless, I didn’t foresee any problems with meeting our minimum targets. I wanted to take it easy.

In the workshop, I had just lit the firebed and forge when there was a knock at the outside door.

Sure, the weather today was better than yesterday, but I was still taken aback. Who would come into the Black Forest on a day like this?

I unlatched the door, steeled myself in case whoever was waiting outside had nefarious intentions, and opened it.

“Hello, how may we help you?” I said, unintentionally slipping into my professional persona.

There was only one reason for anyone to come here on a day like today (or any other day). That was, of course, if you discounted the possibility of malice.

“A-Ah, um, sorry, but I-I heard that you make custom weapons here...?”

All my caution had been for nothing.

Our visitor was a lone woman with downturned eyes. She was wrapped in a mantle, and her voice was as soft as the buzz of a mosquito’s wings. Clearly, she was quite nervous.

However, she was tall. Helen was about the same height as me (or slightly taller) and was well above average for this world, but this woman was even taller—two meters at least. The workshop door was hardly what you would call small either, but she’d have to duck under the frame to come inside.

“It’s raining, so why don’t you come in for now?” I suggested. “Take care not to hit your head.”

I turned around to see Helen behind me.

When did she...? Maybe Helen's why our guest is so skittish.

I patted Helen on the shoulder and asked Rike to bring over a towel.

The woman removed her cloak, revealing a large knapsack. Inside were what looked like two long poles.

I wonder what those could be.

She set down her bag and sat on the simple log stool where I'd guided her.

Rike came back with the towels. Since our visitor was so tall, she'd brought not just one, but two.

The woman took the towels, bowing her head. "Thank you."

Sitting down, she was only slightly shorter than Rike standing up. Rike looked like a child handing her mother a towel, but I knew better than to say that thought out loud for fear of the consequences.

Luckily for our visitor, I had already lit the fires, so the inside of the workshop was nice and toasty. However, the air would continue to get hotter and drier, and it was only a matter of time before it became scorching.

Lidy brought over a cup of wine cut with hot water. Mint tea would've had a cooling effect, so the wine was a more effective way to warm up the body.

The woman finished drying herself off. I settled in to listen to her story. Samya was accompanying me as a lie detector, and Helen was here as a bodyguard just in case. Everyone else went back to their work.

"It may get loud in a minute," I told her. "Please pardon the noise."

"N-No, I-I'm the one who came here uninvited..." she stammered apologetically.

She didn't need to feel sorry—there was little recourse for prospective customers to contact us in the first place. It'd be another story if we could set up a messenger dove or raven system with Camilo...or a messenger drake?

"Away from civilization as we are, there is no need to stand on ceremony," I assured her. "There is one thing I would like to confirm. You came here alone, correct?"

“Yes,” she said with a firm nod.

Samya dipped her head minutely. The woman was telling the truth.

“That’s good. Welcome to our forge. My name is Eizo,” I said by way of introduction. “What is your request?”

I did my best to present a sunny smile.

At least, cheerful was what I was aiming for, but...Samya was clearly suppressing a grin of her own, and Helen’s expression twisted slightly. I chose to ignore them both.

The woman took a sip of her wine. “Ah, my name is Anne,” she replied, blinking rapidly.

She let out a breath, and then rummaged through her bag sitting beside her, taking out the long objects I’d noticed before.

She set them on the table. My eyes widened.

Suddenly, Helen unsheathed her knife and struck out at Anne, her movements a wild blur.

“Helen, stop!” I managed to yell.



The edge of the knife hovered a hair's breadth above Anne. Helen wasn't called Lightning Strike for nothing.

"W-W-W-Wait a minute! This is all a misunderstanding," Anne stuttered. She tried to stand, but her strength had deserted her. She raised both hands in placation instead. Desperately, she continued, "I...I have no intention of harming you!"

On the table lay two shortswords I'd forged with my own hands...the very weapons that Helen had lost in the empire.

The atmosphere was suddenly thick enough to cut, filled with killing intent. At my urging, Helen had narrowly stopped herself. But I knew she would happily slit Anne's throat if I snapped my fingers and said, "*Go.*"

Should bloodshed be necessary to protect my family, so be it. However, I didn't want Helen to be the one to dirty their hands.

If it came to that, I'd confront Anne myself once she left the cabin and take her out while she was on the road back to where she came from.

"I think it's time you explained what you're here for," I demanded.

"Y-Yes, of course!" She nodded fervently, throwing her whole body behind the motion. It reminded me of the way Lucy wagged her tail.

The others stopped what they were doing and gathered to listen.

Anne began to tell her story, her expression serious. "As I said earlier, we bear no ill will toward you."

She gave off a mellow and airheaded impression, but she spoke with precision. Between the panicked woman we saw earlier and the one now, I wondered which was the real Anne.

"In our eyes, you belong to the kingdom, simply based on where you reside and the company you keep."

She sipped her wine. Helen was still on edge, ready to behead Anne if she so much lifted a finger out of place.

Since I wasn't originally from this world, I didn't think of myself as part of the

kingdom. I had met Camilo, Marius, and other residents of this land before any others simply because of my home's location. Had this forest or this forge been located within the empire, I might have built relationships with the people there instead.

I remembered a saying, "There are no 'what-ifs' in life," so perhaps that possibility didn't exist in this universe.

Anne cleared her throat and continued. "In addition, His Imperial Majesty acknowledges that it is unfavorable for the empire should you decide to throw your full support behind our opposition. We have had, after all, ample opportunity to test the quality of your work."

She must be talking about the bulk order of swords Camilo requested. The ones for which the margrave received a parcel of the empire's land—desolate land with next to no residents, but land nevertheless—in exchange.

They likely had the time to try the two swords, Helen's dual blades, that were laying in front of us as well. The empire had wasted no time suppressing the uprising.

"However, we cannot afford to allow a wildcard to do as they please either. Therefore, I am here to verify what kind of man you are."

"If that's the case, isn't drawing suspicion toward yourself a mistake?" I asked.

Had she kept her mouth shut, gone along with the pretense of a commission, and observed us in the meantime, she could have returned home without any risk to herself. Even if we suspected her of wrongdoing, we wouldn't have had any proof.

She might not have imagined that she was putting her life at stake, but even so, it was hard to believe that she had made the best decision.

Anne nodded. "I agree with you."

"Then, why...?"

"His Majesty told me to speak openly. Should I fail to return, that is an answer in its own way."

She speaks on heavy subjects with such ease. Setting that aside, the fact that

this visit could be a matter of life or death was already factored in. If we were to “take care” of her, the empire would still benefit in some way or another. In that case, she must not be the average person.

If I were killed, the only ones who would be angry would be my friends and acquaintances in the kingdom (I could only hope they cared to that extent), but there would be no major impact on the kingdom or the empire. It would be merely the death of an old blacksmith who lived in a bizarre place.

On the other hand, Anne must’ve been important enough that her death or confinement would cause an incident between the two nations. There was a vast difference between her true standing and how she’d introduced herself earlier.

And so, I asked her about the discrepancy. “In that case, there must be something you haven’t yet told us.”

She looked at me blankly for a split second, but then she rose to her feet. “You are correct.”

Helen, Samya, and Diana swiftly moved in front of me.

A nonplussed expression flashed across Anne’s face, but she was soon smiling again. She then dipped into the elegant curtsy of a noblewoman.

“I am Annemarie Christine Weisner, the seventh princess of the empire.”



Chapter 2: To Forge or Not to Forge

After Anne—Annemarie—introduced herself as the empire’s seventh imperial princess, she sat down again. Helen, Samya, and Diana (who’d all stepped forward to guard me) returned to their seats too. On the outside, I projected a calm that belied the surprise this situation warranted, but a good part of me was simply too shocked to react.

That being said, since Anne was the seventh princess, she was far down in the line of succession. Counting princesses alone, there were six people ahead of her; with princes added to the mix, she was probably even further from the throne. After all, it was highly unlikely that the emperor only had daughters.

Regardless, her presence here posed a risk. She was still a blood relation of the emperor, no matter how low in rank she was. If we were to treat her with impropriety, it was almost certain that we would cause an international incident. As a lowly forge, we were in no position to be rude—we could only be a target for rudeness.

On the other hand, you could say that the empire was showing us preferential treatment in a way. The emperor could have sent a spy or—if it had to be a noble—someone from a branch family, but he had intentionally sent one of his own family members. Which meant...

I sighed and mumbled to myself, “She’s here as a hostage...”

Though she shared the emperor’s blood, the disappearance of a seventh princess was unlikely to cause the empire significant trouble. It wasn’t a bad strategy to send her in as a hostage. It was strange for the empire to have sent a hostage of their own volition, but in my previous world, there had been a similar system during Japan’s Sengoku period. Hostages had been sent as reassurance for an alliance or vassalage. In this case, it was the former.

Of course, all of that was assuming that Anne had told us the truth. I glanced at Samya, who dipped her head a fraction; she hadn’t sensed any signs that Anne had been lying. However, if Anne was able to lie with perfect composure,

then not even Samya would be able to tell.

Anne overheard my mutterings and smiled. She was calm and appeared to understand her own position well. That was the most dangerous type of person to deal with.

I heaved a second sigh, deeper than the first. "In any case, I acknowledge that neither you nor the empire mean us any harm."

"Thank you," Anne said with a dip of her head.

"But let me confirm one thing," I continued.

"What is it?"

"Naturally, this includes Helen as well, correct?"

Anne's eyes narrowed into crescents. Her expression could've been mistaken for a smile, but it was the smile of a predator who had spotted prey.

Helen stared fixedly at me. For a while, her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

Silence descended upon the workshop. Flames in the forge and firebed flared, stoked by the magical breeze. The crackle of the burning charcoal resounded through the room. I thought I heard someone swallow nervously.

"Well... Yes, of course," Anne replied after a beat. "Should we harm her, you would turn hostile toward the empire, correct? We should like to avoid such an outcome. It appears that you are not a staunch nationalist, and there is no reason for us to intentionally court your enmity."

Helen and I simultaneously breathed sighs of relief. She could rest easy now, and she would no longer need to wear a wig when we traveled to the city.

"All right, then let's move on from this tiresome topic," I said. "I will make you a weapon. Will that satisfy you?"

Anne looked taken aback. Since we'd discussed everything necessary, I could've kicked her out now. But it was raining, and a customer was a customer. *I'll complete her commission before sending her on her way.*

"If possible. It would be for His Majesty," said Anne.

“Hmmm.” I scratched my head. “Our rule is that we only forge weapons for people who come here in person and alone. In this case, that means His Majesty himself would have to visit.”

I didn’t want to make any exceptions to this rule. The mithril rapier Camilo had commissioned had been a special case...but that’d also been an opportunity to experiment with a new metal, and more than anything else, it had been Camilo asking the favor.

“I understand,” Anne replied, getting to her feet.

Is she going home now that she’s completed her duty?

I stood as well, but Anne dipped into a curtsy. “Please, forge me something,” she said. “A greatsword.”

“Greatsword...?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Considering her height, a downstroke with a greatsword would carry devastating force—I didn’t have any difficulty imagining the damage she might cause. Maybe she wouldn’t be able to cleave a person in two...but she’d be able to crush a skull or two as if she were splitting watermelons.

The question of whether she knew how to wield a sword in the first place crossed my mind. It was hard to tell because of her height, but she had a solid physique. Her figure looked like the result of someone stretching Rike vertically upward.

“Can I assume you are proficient with the weapon?” I asked.

“Yes. I am no match for my siblings in terms of brains, and Harriet, my elder sister, is the expert at smaller weapons. My mixed blood is the reason for my appearance.”

Anne is definitely no fool.

Huh...? Mixed race? I thought she was tall, but could she be...?

“Pardon my bluntness, but are you perhaps a member of the giant race?” I asked.

“Yes. It may not be well known within the kingdom, but it is no secret in the empire. There is no one who particularly minds either,” explained Anne. “His Majesty is human. My mother is a giant.”

“Oho.”

So that was it. I’d easily believe anyone claiming that the male giant I’d seen was three meters tall, but apparently, a child born between a giant and a human parent didn’t grow to the same stature.

“Harriet is half-lizardman, and Eleanor is half-dwarf. My elder brother Leopold’s mother was one of the beastfolk. His Majesty does not show favoritism in that regard.”

Anne looked at me meaningfully as if she wanted to ask, “*You would know something about that, no?*” And while it was true that I tried not to discriminate, this and that were two completely different situations.

They *were* different, right?

“I understand,” I said, continuing the conversation. “In that case, I shall make you a greatsword.”

“Thank you.” Remaining seated, Anne bowed her head deeply. “What of the payment?”

“Ah, yes—you can decide on an appropriate price for yourself after you see the finished sword.”

“Eh—?”

Apparently, I had bewildered her with my answer. Rike sighed and told Anne, “This is just the way Boss is.”

“I see. If you wish to commission a first-rate craftsman, you must have the eye to appraise the price,” Anne concluded after hearing Rike, but she seemed to completely misunderstand.

I was about to correct her and explain that I simply wanted my customers to pay what they wanted to pay. But then, someone reached out from behind and stopped me. Judging from the strength in the hand that was now placed over my mouth...it was Diana. She was signaling me to let sleeping dogs lie. I tapped

her hand to tell her I received the message, and she removed it from my mouth.

I refocused my attention on Anne. “I’d like to get a feel for what sword would fit you. Let’s see... Can you take this pole and try a few moves in the open space there?” I handed her a piece of wood that was stacked in the forge, just a scrap piece used for making scabbards and the like. It was a little thick to be the hilt of a sword, but it was a good length. The wood of the trees in this forest was dense and not too light, so it would make a decent substitute for testing purposes.

“All right,” agreed Anne.

The ceiling in the forge was high, so Anne would have ample space to swing the pole.

“Hah!”

She put her strength behind the swing. The wood sliced through the air with a heavy *swoosh*. I’d thought she would be slower, but her movements weren’t dull at all. Her attacks could easily break a bone or two. And a person who was hit in the head might really end up crushed the way I’d pictured earlier.

She continued attacking and defending for a while as if she were facing a real opponent. After she stopped, her shoulders heaved as she tried to catch her breath. “*Haaa...haaa... How...was that...?*”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I was able to gain a general sense of where to go from here.”

Naturally, weight was a priority this time around, but the question was how to balance the heaviness of the sword against the speed of the swing. That was the key to forging a custom-model greatsword.

I looked at Helen, and her expression gave me pause. I quickly warned her off what she was thinking. “It’s raining today...so that’s going to be a no.”

“I-I know that!” she stuttered in reply.

She had been staring at Anne, her eyes alight.

###

The approximate usage of our forge’s metal plates could be described as

follows: one plate to make a knife, two for a shortsword, and three for a longsword. These were, of course, only estimates, so it wasn't unusual for us to use a little more or a little less. Besides, we had to adapt the quantity on a case-by-case basis for weapons and tools that weren't one of the aforementioned three.

The question was, how many plates of metal were needed to forge a greatsword? We had standardized our casting process, so making more plates wasn't a problem. However, it seemed like an exercise in futility to make a lot of plates just to use them all up immediately.

"Why don't we skip the plate metal and start from scratch at the forge?" I suggested to Rike.

She nodded. "Yeah, using the plates seems like it would take double the effort."

This time, it was my turn to nod. "I think so too." Being able to exchange ideas with Rike in this way was invaluable.

Rike gave an order to Samya and the crew—start throwing ore into the forge. It would take some time before the ore was heated through and the metal could be extracted.

I turned to Anne and asked, "Would you like to rest?"

"No," she replied. "If possible, I would like to watch you work."

"All right," I agreed.

Surprise flashed across her features. A normal blacksmith would be reluctant to work in front of a person who wasn't even their apprentice, but our forge was far from normal.

Since Anne was going to be observing for the time being, I drove any worries about the guest room and our guest herself from my head—it was time to focus on the task before me.

Once the ore in the forge was as molten as it could be and ready to be removed, I poured it out. I continued pouring past the amount needed to make one normal-sized plate, so we ended up with a larger plate. It would've been

convenient if one large plate was enough for Anne's sword, but it wasn't, so I continued to smelt more ore.

The forge was another magical item (supposedly). It prevented the workshop from heating up to some extent, but the scientific realities of having an object that surpassed 1,000°C in a room were unavoidable. I was dripping with sweat before much time had passed. Everyone in the family knew to stay hydrated and had wooden cups they refilled from the water jug, but Anne didn't drink anything.

"You should change and drink some water sooner rather than later, otherwise the heat might make you feel sick," I advised her. "We wouldn't want that."

"I-I understand."

Lidy handed Anne a cup reserved for guests. Were she to collapse from heatstroke, we had no IVs for fluids, and our means of treating her were limited. It would be better for all of us if she took steps to prevent such an outcome.

By the time I finished the second round of smelting, I was as soaked as Anne, who had traveled here in the rain. I had to wait for the iron to cool, and we needed time to cool off too. The morning had already come and gone, so we all filed out of the workshop for a lunch break.

I remembered to tell Diana to show Anne the guest room.

It might be smart to construct another guest room. If a different customer happened to come right now, we wouldn't have a spare room to put them up in.

Once I clear Anne's commission, I'll bring up the issue to everyone, and we can decide together.

I shut the door to the empty workshop.

We decided to hang Anne's soaking clothing and mantle out on the terrace beside our own laundry. Anne then followed Diana to the guest room to store away her belongings and change. Diana lent her a dress, but on Anne it was the length of a regular shirt. On the bottom, she changed into loose pants that looked easy to move in.

“Thank you for all of your help,” Anne said to Diana, bowing her head.

“Not at all,” replied Diana.

Their mundane conversation was a far cry from a sophisticated, highbrow conversation between a noblewoman and a princess, and the discrepancy was off-putting.

Rike and Diana returned from hanging Anne’s clothing with Lucy at their heels. The pup had been napping outside. Perhaps she’d wanted to be in a place where Krul would be able to sense her, even if just a little.

We took seats around the dining table to eat lunch (Lucy waited on the floor), and together we chorused, “*Itadakimasu.*” Anne looked daunted, but she mimicked us.

“Sorry about the simple meal,” I told Anne. “This is all we have to offer.”

“There is no need to apologize. I am the one who is intruding on your household.”

I had been worried whether the food would be to her liking, but it appeared that I shouldn’t have been. She was working through...well, to put it tactfully, a serving proportional to the size of her body. She would be fine for the next two or three days.

Having to eat food you don’t like, even for a short time, is more unbearable than it sounds.

After we finished lunch, we returned to the workshop. Back to work.

I had now smelted enough iron for the greatsword. Everyone besides Rike continued working on making standard metal plates.

“Rike, can you help me?” I asked.

“Of course,” she replied, smiling and flexing her biceps for show. You wouldn’t think it by her diminutive frame, but she was strapped with muscle.

It would be tough to make a greatsword by myself, and I certainly needed the help. Rike would lighten my burden, and this would serve as an opportunity for her to learn by observation.

A large lump of iron filled the firebed, and I worked hard to heat it through. The process was the same as any other sword—once it was the right temperature, we’d hammer it on the anvil. However...

“It’s scorching hot and it weighs a ton...” I grumbled. I had felt its substantial weight when I’d carried the metal to the firebed, but now it was hot too. And, since I could only hold it using the tongs, it felt even heavier.

After I transferred the lump to the anvil—a feat which took all my strength—Rike and I hammered it out, our breath and movements in sync. I was working, but at the same time I was pointing out the places I wanted her to hit. Rike picked up on my signals immediately and did exactly as I directed. Maybe she had experience working on a single item with her parents too.

Once the metal had cooled slightly, I returned it to the firebed to raise its temperature back up. It was still just as heavy.

“My back is going to hurt after this,” I grouched.

“My father sometimes had back pain too,” Rike said. “Please take care of yourself.”

“You’re right...”

As I checked the fire, I hammered my lower back with my fists. The steel sat in the glowing red heart of the magical firebed. Slowly, it turned the same color as the flames, almost as if it were being absorbed into the fire.

When it was ready, I removed it again, and we hammered it out longer. Since it wasn’t even the right length yet, imbuing it with magic was taking a back seat to elongating the metal.

Next to us, Lucy was curled up on Anne’s knees. Diana peered our way with a tinge of envy in her eyes.

It can’t be helped. Lucy sweetens up to people fast.

“Oh, if it’s not a bother, can you give her water too?” I asked Anne. “If you fill this dish, she’ll drink by herself.”

With her fur coat, Lucy heated up faster than the rest of us in the sweltering forge. We had a water dish just for her so she could stay hydrated.

I'll keep an eye on her. If she starts looking fatigued, I'll ask Anne to bring her into the house.

The gears in my head spun as I brought my hammer down on the metal, which was considerably longer than when we had started.

Rike and I repeated the same steps over and over until the metal plate was at our goal length of 170 centimeters.

The long metal plate was of course going to be the blade, but we would have to make another plate for the handle. This process wasn't much different from forging a shortsword or longsword. However, from tip to hilt, this custom sword would end up around 180 centimeters—nearly the height of Anne herself.

It was going to take a long time to finish. This wasn't a one-man job, and at some point, differences in the process would start cropping up.

"Come to think of it, you and I used to forge longswords together," I mused, turning to Rike.

"Ah, that's right," she replied.

When did she become able to work independently?

Rike was a quick learner. Not even a year had passed since I'd come to this world. Even so, the days when we used to work together felt nostalgic, a feeling that Rike shared, judging by the emotion on her face.

"Let's stop here for today," I declared. "I'm counting on your help tomorrow too."

Rike smiled from ear to ear. "No problem!"

Dinner that night was a festive affair with the entire family (and Anne). Lucy gobbled up several slices of meat before demanding to be let out. I opened the door for her and she ran back to the hut, holding a fat steak in her mouth.

She must be planning to share the feast with her big sister.

"Your wolf is one clever little lady," Anne commented, watching Lucy run off through the open doorway. The two of them had spent most of the afternoon together, and the pup had completely won Anne over.

“You bet she is!” Diana boasted.

When did she come up next to us?

As Lucy’s mama, of course Diana was happy to hear her kid complimented. Admittedly, I was pleased as well. Never mind that Lucy was smart because she was a magical beast. A compliment was a compliment, and happiness was happiness.

Shutting the door, I said to Diana, “If it’s going to pour tomorrow, the two of them are going to have to stay in the hut for the day.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” she replied, a wistful expression on her face.

The hut was spacious, so hopefully they wouldn’t be bored. We could bring meals to them.

After that, we returned to the table to continue our interrupted dinner.

“About the empire—or the emperor, I should say... He really doesn’t see Helen as a problem?” I asked Anne.

“Yes, it’s true.”

Since Anne was here anyway, it was the perfect opportunity to better understand the situation in the empire. I had thought that she would sidestep the question, give a canned response, and leave it at that, but she was surprisingly straightforward.

“The revolution has been suppressed and the loose ends tied up. At this point, even if one person were to make a fuss and declare that it was all a hoax, they wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything,” Anne explained. “The emperor did order a pursuit, but it was only a cursory attempt. The men he sent don’t know about this place. They likely gave up after a month at most.”

“I suppose if he hadn’t done anything about Helen’s escape, someone would’ve suspected that everything was a farce. Of course, their suspicions would’ve been right.”

Anne nodded. “Yes.” She brought a spoonful of soup to her mouth. This was her third bowl. It was a good thing the food was to her taste. After swallowing her mouthful, she continued. “If anything, he’s more angry at the commanding

officer who Helen overheard.”

“Aaah, that makes sense.”

The painful truth was that the man had simply screwed up. The sham of a kidnapping and pursuit had been enacted for the sole sake of cleaning up his mess. Hearing that, I felt as if I had just been given a glimpse into the emperor’s woes.

“He won’t be *disposed* of, but it’ll be difficult for him to move up in the future,” Anne remarked, her tone cool. Perhaps she had been inconvenienced by the messy affair too.

A shiver ran down my spine as I finished up my dinner.

###

The next morning, it was raining even harder than it had been two days ago. Going to the lake in this weather was going to be tiresome.

Which was exactly why I gave up on that idea from the get-go.

“I was right to have gone yesterday,” I muttered to myself while sitting on a chair in the living room. The deluge of rain would fill up the cistern nicely too. We wouldn’t be able to drink the water, but we could still use it for chores and work.

I heard the clack of a door being unlatched down the hallway. Someone was up.

Wonder who it is...

“Oh, good morning, Boss.”

It was Rike.

“G’morning.”

“How rare for you to be home at this time,” Rike said.

“I decided not to fetch water today because of *that*.” I shot a pointed look toward the window.

Rike glanced outside and nodded. “Aaah, I understand now.”

She had probably suspected just by the pitter-patter of rain on the roof, but hearing it was one thing and seeing it was another.

I looked outside too. We hadn't hit torrential levels, but it was raining hard enough that anyone would think, *Yup, it's pouring out there.*

"I'm going to drop in on the hut," I said, rising from the chair.

"Be careful," Rike replied.

I cut off a few portions of the jerky that we reserved for Lucy and Krul, enough to last them the day, and stuffed them into a knapsack. I added a few towels, pouches of water, and two solid dishes carved from wood. Lastly, I threw a thick cloth over myself as a makeshift poncho. It wouldn't be as effective as the real thing, but it was better than nothing.

I walked through the rain over to the hut. The ground was muddy and slippery, so I was slightly unsteady on my feet. *I suppose the soil in the forest must be so hard because of the way the mud dried and solidified. I'll have to look up the details someday.*

I walked slowly so that I wouldn't fall, and it took me twice as long as usual to make it to the hut (although it was still an insignificant amount of time overall).

Krul welcomed me when I entered, cooing "*Kululululu,*" and licking a wet stripe up my cheek.

"Settle down, little lady," I said. "I'm going to wipe you down first, okay?"

I took out one of the towels I'd prepared, wet it with the water from the pouch, and used it to clean Krul. The hut was raised above ground level, so there was no rainwater seeping up through the floor, but because it had been raining for several days on end, the air was heavy with moisture.

Before the rainy season starts next year, I'll have to think of a strategy to waterproof the place and add the covered hallway to the house.

Staying completely clean and dry was impossible, but the daily wash made a difference to Krul's mood. After I finished with her, I looked for Lucy to towel her off too.

I was blindsided by the spectacle that awaited me.

“Hoo boy...” I couldn’t help but mumble.

“*Arf! Arf!*” Lucy stood in front of me, her tail wagging as usual...but her fur was coated in mud.

Krul huffed. She sounded—and perhaps actually was—exasperated.

Had Lucy been frolicking outside in the rain yesterday? Or had she rolled around on the floor after returning to the cabin? Maybe Krul had even tried to stop her, but would a puppy Lucy’s age listen to reason?

“Hold still,” I instructed Lucy. “I’ll be done soon.”

I rinsed the mud from her fur with water from the pouch, figuring it would be faster than wiping her clean. Lucy shook her body energetically to fling off the water, and I dried her off with a fresh towel.

As I did, I looked around the hut. “They’re still little, but this hut might be too cramped for the two of them after they’re grown,” I muttered.

There was enough space at the moment for Lucy to run around and for Krul to lie down, but I didn’t know how much bigger Lucy was going to grow. The wolf we’d assumed was her mother had been the size of a large dog, but since Lucy had been turned into a magical beast, she might end up even bigger. There was even a chance she would grow to the size of a horse, about the same as Krul. It was going to be difficult for us to take a giant wolf into the city.

Indifferent to my worries about the future, Lucy, clean once more, started romping around the hut. I watched her play as I sliced up the jerky and arranged it on the wooden platters. I also filled the wooden bowls with water.

“I’m sorry to leave you like this, but be good for me today, okay?” I said. “It’s dreadful out there, so stay inside.”

“*Kulululu,*” Krul replied.

Lucy followed up with a “*Bark!*”

I stroked their heads, then ran back to the cabin.

By the time I returned, nearly everybody else was awake. This was around the time I would be out at the lake, and the others usually freshened up and changed while I was gone. I hadn’t known the exact time that everyone usually

woke up, but apparently it was pretty early.

I had said “nearly,” because one person was missing: Anne.

“There might be a latch on her door, but she’s still in enemy territory,” I commented. “Should I be surprised that a princess could be so careless? Or is it *because* she grew up as royalty that she’s carefree despite her current situation?”

“I think that’s just the way she is,” replied Diana. “As the seventh princess, her title probably does not affect her very much. It was the same with my brother. He was third in line, which was why he was co-opted into the guard regiment.”

“Now that you mention it, why was Marius working the streets instead of taking a command position?” I asked.

“Those were father’s orders,” Diana explained. “Apparently, he told my brother, ‘Someday, you’ll become a local governor and aid your brother’s administration. To prepare for that day, walk the streets with your own feet and memorize every corner of the city. A commander is often unable to act as he wishes. Go as a common foot soldier.’”

“I see.”

I remembered when Marius used to guard the city entrance. His duties back then must’ve also included patrolling in and around the city. I’d never had any reason to meet with him on the streets, but he’d probably even patrolled risky territories.

Whether such knowledge really came in handy wasn’t up for a layman like me to decide. I avoided involving myself in politics, even in my previous life. Regardless, Marius’s (and Diana’s) father had thought it was an effective strategy.

“What fate would have awaited the former governor had things played out according to your father’s plans?” I asked.

“Retirement, the same as father. Apparently, he’d even had a retirement destination all picked out,” Diana answered. “But with everything that happened, I’m guessing he has no choice but to stay in his position until a successor can be found.”

Diana was referring to the circumstances that had led Marius to become the head of the household and enabled Diana to live with us. Samya and Rike had already been living here at the time, but since they didn't know much about it, Diana kept her answer vague.

After that conversation, we turned to our respective morning chores. For the time being, we decided not to wake Anne.

When I was about halfway through cooking breakfast, Anne finally stirred. I'd just been thinking that we should rouse her soon.

She came stumbling out of her room, yawning out a greeting.
"Mmmorn...e'ryone..."

Her hair had been messy to begin with, but after a night's sleep, it was practically a bird's nest. Her eyes were droopy, though I couldn't tell whether that was because they were downturned to begin with or because she was drowsy.

"Good morning," I replied. "There's water in that basin, so use it to wash up, and please bring out any laundry you have."

"Mmmaight...thaaanks..."

Anne kneeled next to the basin and thrust her face down into it with such vigor that I was reminded of a person apologizing profusely in *dogeza*. We all stared at her in shock. After a few seconds, she threw her head back out of the water.

"Phew! *Brrr!* That sure woke me up!" she said. All traces of sleepiness had blown clean away; her speech was clear and her eyes bright.

Her complete one-eighty only added to our surprise. Individuals like her were pretty rare here, although I vaguely remembered people with similar habits in my previous world. Maybe this was also a result of her upbringing in the empire.

I asked Rike to give Anne a towel and then returned to my cooking.



“Say, you’ll be able to complete my sword today, right?” Anne asked while spooning the breakfast soup into her mouth.

I nodded. “Yes. There’s not much left to do, but it will still take the rest of the day. It won’t be possible for you to go home tonight, especially considering the rain.”

“Seems like it,” she replied, laid back. She’d said the water dunk had woken her up, but nevertheless, she was apparently the type whose engines were slow to start in the morning.

“If it were sunny, we would escort you out of the forest, but with the weather as it is, I’m afraid we won’t be able to,” I added.

“I don’t mind staying another day,” she answered. “I dislike moving around.”

I almost shouted, “*No way!*” but I managed to rein in my surprise.

Brilliant work there, me.

By the way Samya’s nose twitched, I guessed she was thinking the same thing.

Well, Anne could’ve been dispatched on this mission because of her skill in thinking on her feet rather than her combat abilities.

“So, I assume that you’ll be observing today as well?” I asked.

“Yes, please.”

Rike and I were forging Anne’s greatsword while the others continued smelting and making metal plates. Anne observed. Krul and Lucy were standing guard in the hut.

We said our prayers in the *kamidana* in the workshop. I had informed Anne in advance, “You’re free to join or not. It’s up to you.” In the end, she decided to follow along and participate in the ritual with us.

“It’s motivating to start the day with a ritual like this,” she said afterward.

Anne’s trademark downturned eyes were soft and drowsy, perhaps because she had eaten her fill at breakfast. She could’ve taken a nap in her room if she’d wanted. After all, she wouldn’t be doing anything besides watching us work, and Lucy wasn’t here for her to play with.

I sighed lightly and got to work.

The previous day, we had elongated the metal to the target length, but it was still a normal rectangular plate of metal. Our task now was to shape the plate into a proper sword.

Heating the entire plate at once was neither possible nor useful. However, the problem with raising the temperature in portions was that we had to be careful not to introduce burrs and imperfections to the metal. Luckily, since I was the one doing the heating, we could sidestep that issue.

So, I heated just the area we needed to work on, and then Rike and I hammered the metal in unison. We started with the section that would be the blade, aiming for a hexagonal cross section. It was going to be a double-edged blade.

Two-handed swords came in all different sizes and types, but the strength of a greatsword correlated to its weight. Therefore, we avoided thinning out the blade too much—the desired thickness was around a quarter of the blade's width.

We shaped the hilt into a straight cylinder. Since the blade was so heavy, it was difficult to maneuver while we worked, but somehow, we managed.

"Can I borrow your hands for a second?" I asked Anne.

I directed her to line her two fists up. At the bottom of the hilt, I installed what would be called the *tsuka gashira* (the pommel cap) on a katana. I didn't secure it with rivets because I thought the weight of the sword would be too much for the rivets to bear. The higher the forces the rivets needed to sustain, the more likely they would be damaged, which was something I wanted to avoid.

With a small hammer, I welded together the cap to the end of the hilt. My first priority was to securely fasten the two pieces. Any magic work was secondary.

We finished just after noon—by the end, we had a proper greatsword, albeit missing a hand guard.

"This is the general shape of the sword," I declared. "All right, let's eat now."

We'll finish up the rest afterward."

"Yes!" Rike cheered. She went to tell the others it was time for lunch.

We stuck to safe conversation topics over our meal. I didn't want to step on a land mine by accident and spend the rest of the day working in awkward silence. Dinnertime was different than lunch—there was always the chance one would forget what'd been discussed after a good night's sleep. That was a piece of wisdom I'd learned in my previous world.

Having finished the general shaping of the sword before we broke for lunch, all that remained were enhancements and finishing touches. One of the most crucial elements of our forge's products was the amount of magic we could imbue into the weapon.

Anne had a family name...or rather, she was straight up part of the imperial family, so it was extremely likely that she possessed at least cursory knowledge of magic. Perhaps she could even sense the magical essence weaved into certain products.

If that weren't the case, I'd be able to whip up something quick and say, "Here ya go!" However, Anne had been able to appraise Helen's shortswords, so she would likely be able to call my bluff. There was no reason to cross such a perilous bridge. Therefore, my next step was to imbue the sword with magic.

Rike was able to manipulate magic but only to a certain extent. When our needs crossed the threshold of her skills, I had to take over. I told Anne that I would be "fine-tuning" the sword, which had cooled over lunch. Then, I settled in to hammer it.

Since durability was more important than sharpness in this case, I focused my work on the body of the blade, rather than the edges specifically. The blade was long, so the work took time, but in the end, I was able to weave in the maximum amount of magical essence the metal could sustain.

After that, I took a rasp to smooth over the minute flaws in the surface. This step entailed shaving the magic-imbued metal, so I did it myself. I didn't whet the blade—the weight of the sword alone would be enough to smash through most things.

In the meantime, Rike forged the parts that would form the guard, which we would later pin to the sword. Since the pommel cap would be subject to centrifugal forces, I had welded it to the hilt. However, the guard wouldn't have to bear the same pressure, so I decided that welding wouldn't be necessary. In addition, the guard was a conspicuous part of the sword, so I figured that if she wanted something different later on, she'd be free to change it out as she pleased.

As I went over the length of the sword with the rasp, it left behind a smooth, mirror-like finish. Next came quenching, but the sword was too long to submerge in the cistern I normally used. Instead, we would pour water over it.

While I heated the sword, the others filled up basins and tubs from the cistern. They'd use the water to furiously douse the sword to cool it down. The key points here were when to give the "start" and "stop" signals. I figured I would intuit the right timing one way or another.

"All right, get ready!" I announced.

"Okaaay!" everyone said as one.

I lifted the red-hot sword and brought it to hover over the cistern. The others were waiting on the sidelines carrying containers of all sorts filled with water.

"And...go!"

At my signal, everyone began tossing water over the sword. The metal squealed, and steam billowed up from the surface, enveloping the room with a haze. The heat slammed into us, but we couldn't afford to back down.

I waited for the right time before giving the next order. "Stop!"

Everyone instantly froze, and I inspected the sword carefully.

It was up to standard. Somehow, we'd done it.

"Okay, it looks good," I said.

The others let out sighs of relief. Work that demanded one's entire focus sure was an energy drain.

I'll pull out all the stops for dinner tonight. It'll double as Anne's going-away feast too.

“But,” I added, “there’s still more to do.”

At my proclamation, determination flared up in the others’ eyes even as their shoulders drooped.

We repeated the quenching process several more times, finally finishing an hour or so before the sun would set (according to my internal clock). Then, with everyone looking on, I installed the guard Rike had made. Last but not least, I engraved the sitting fat cat insignia into the sword.

“Aaand...it’s complete!” I declared.

Everyone cheered. This was the first time we’d all worked together to forge a weapon, which lent the occasion a sense of novelty.

“You all get along so well,” remarked Anne. Beneath her laid-back tone was a trace of loneliness.

“Yes,” I replied. “After all, we’re family.”

I had everyone tidy up as I wrapped the hilt with leather to give it some grip. Now, the commission was truly finished.

“Here you are,” I said, presenting the greatsword to Anne.

“Thank you,” she exclaimed. She walked over to the shop space on the other side of the counter where it was more open.

Anne lifted the sword straight above her head and then swung it down. The blade made a heavy *woosh* like it was smashing through the air.

Next came a horizontal strike. Again, there came a dull thunder. From the display, I had no doubt that anyone who tried to block such an attack would find their weapon split in two.

The demonstration also made me realize how strong Anne truly was. It took serious muscle just to swing that sword up and down. Did her power come from her non-human side?

“She reminds me of what Diana used to be like,” Helen whispered, having come up next to me when I wasn’t paying attention.

“Her moves are polished...but ill-suited for real battle?” I asked quietly.

Helen nodded.

Which means she spars regularly but has seldom been on a true battlefield.

“In that case, I should be able to take her down,” I concluded.

“You’ll be in for a world of pain if you underestimate her,” Helen warned.

“I know that.”

It was easy to imagine the destructive power of a full-out blow by Anne’s greatsword. I knew Helen was only looking out for me, so I patted her on the back in thanks. Helen took a few steps away. I hoped she’d received my feelings of gratitude.

I picked up an entry-level sword and thrust it into a spare log. Then, I called over to Anne, “Here, test your sword on this.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Sure—I’ll repair it if you break it.”

The entry-level sword was a precious product of our forge. I was indeed proud of it, but if it could be of service, why not use it? We could always keep it in reserve instead of selling it.

“In that case,” Anne said.

She lifted her greatsword, held it horizontally, and paused, focusing all her strength into the attack.

“Hah!” she cried, her spirit flaring.

A dull silver light flashed through the air in a perfect, horizontal line. There was a high-pitched clank. Anne completed her stroke as if she hadn’t hit anything at all.

But it was immediately apparent that her sword had found its target. The entry-level longsword sticking out of the log was now missing its upper half. After a moment, we heard a clunk. The top had come crashing down a few paces away.

“Impressive,” I said, clapping to compliment Anne’s skills. Like Helen had said, were I to make light of Anne’s skills, my upper body might very well meet the

same fate.

“Not at all. It is the weapon that is impressive. My abilities are hardly anything to speak of,” Anne demurred. “This sword is truly splendid.”

“Well, this is my trade,” I replied.

“No...” She paused before continuing. “All right, we’ll leave it at that,” she said with a sly smile.

I immediately was reminded that Anne hadn’t come here simply to deliver a message and commission a weapon. For now, it seemed that she wasn’t going to press me any further. I hoped, in fact, that she would let sleeping dogs lie and go home without broaching the subject at all, but would events unfold according to my wishes?

Filled with a vague unease, I left the workshop to prepare dinner.

I raised my wooden cup. “Here’s to another successful commission!”

“Cheers!” everyone chorused, lifting their own cups.

We were celebrating with wine, except for Rike, who was drinking brandy.

Dinner was salt-cured venison and boar from our stockpile, which I’d grilled with herbs and a soy sauce glaze. I’d selected premium cuts for the occasion. I’d wanted to make a yeasted bread, but I hadn’t had the time, so I served the usual flatbread instead. The soup course was nothing but our usual fare... In fact, it was just our leftovers from lunch with extra meat added. Regardless, this was a lavish enough meal for us ordinary folks.

“This brown sauce is a bit of an acquired taste,” I explained to Anne, gesturing to the meat flavored with soy sauce. “If you don’t like it, don’t force yourself to eat it. There’s plenty of herb-roasted meat too.”

Anne nodded. “All right. Thank you very much.”

Soy sauce was a type of fermented good, so it had a distinct smell. My family didn’t mind, but there were always going to be people who didn’t enjoy the taste.

Anne took a slice of soy-sauce-glazed boar meat and bit into it. I found myself

staring at her without meaning to. She chewed the bite carefully and then swallowed it with a gulp.

Trepidatiously, I asked, "What do you think?"

"It's delicious!!!" she exclaimed, practically shouting. Her volume surprised me, but I was just glad that she didn't dislike the flavor. She suddenly looked sheepish and lowered her voice. "Oh, I apologize..."

"That's quite all right. I'm happy to hear it." I tried my best to smile, but judging by the way Samya and Helen were desperately holding back the laughter threatening to burst out of them...and the way Rike and Diana's faces had gone all funny...I had limited success. Even Lidy's expression loudly proclaimed her skepticism.

Even guys like me have salesman smiles in their back pocket, you know? I didn't have much of a chance to use it in my previous life, so I'm out of practice is all.

"What is it seasoned with?" Anne asked.

"Soy sauce, a condiment from the north made with fermented soybeans and wheat," I explained. "I used other ingredients to complement its taste."

"Oh, a northern seasoning, is it?" Her eyes narrowed. She must've guessed from my name that I was from the north, but this would've cinched it.

There's no way she would've suspected I wasn't from this world originally.

I smiled brightly as if I hadn't noticed her reaction. "A merchant acquaintance of mine helped source it." We were both trying to sound the other out.

"If that merchant trades in the empire, I would like to acquire some for myself," she said.

"I shall hint at your request if the opportunity arises," I promised.

Dinner was a rowdy affair. We didn't talk about anything sensitive for the rest of the night. The most memorable moment was when Diana and Anne talked about the kingdom and empire. As the lady of a comital family, Diana had no shortage of opportunities to visit the royal court, and as an imperial princess...well, I'm sure you can imagine. We all asked the two about their

experiences.

Eventually, the humble but lively feast came to an end. Everyone pitched in to clean up, and all that was left was to sleep.

Before I turned in, I told Anne, “We’ll accompany you to the forest entrance if the rain lets up tomorrow.”

“Please,” she replied. “You would be doing me a great service.”

Anne and I, along with the rest of the family, wished each other good night and returned to our respective rooms.

Then...in the dead of night...

There was a knock at my door.

Chapter 3: A Letter to the Emperor

Knock, knock, knock.

None of my family had ever come to my room *this* late at night. *It could simply be the first time...* Not impossible, but unlikely. Therefore, my midnight visitor had to be someone outside of the family, and there was only one person it could be.

“Please wait a minute,” I called out.

I stripped off my sleepwear and threw on proper clothes. Before I unlatched my door, I slid my knife into my waistband at the small of my back. *Just in case.* Also, rather than being directly in front of the door, I stood off to the side.

My visitor didn’t immediately kick down the door when I slipped the latch, so I eased it open. Just as I had suspected, Anne was on the other side.

She loomed, still as a statue in the dark, backlit by the living room lantern we’d left burning in case of any late-night bathroom trips. With the light behind her, I couldn’t make out her expression.

“Is anything the matter?” I was whispering so as not to wake the others.

She, too, kept her voice low when she replied. “There’s something I wanted to talk about...”

Had she been one of the family, I would’ve invited her inside my room, but she was a guest. Having to field a barrage of groundless accusations would be a massive pain.

“Let’s talk over there,” I said, gesturing toward the common area.

I didn’t feel any killing intent radiating from her, but I made sure to have her walk in front of me anyway. She didn’t make any unusual movement as we crossed the cabin. I sat her down at the dining table and then lit the stove.

In moments like this, the magical stove was a blessing—a fire was burning merrily in no time. I set a small pot of water over the stove to boil and then

invited Anne to speak. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

Anne's gaze wandered from my face to our surroundings and back. She seemed hesitant, but eventually, she opened her mouth to speak. "Won't you...come to the empire?"

The soft bubbling of water coming to a boil filled the room.

After a pause, I quietly replied, "I can't do that."

Though I wasn't a staunch nationalist or anything, without the magic in the Black Forest, I'd be unable to continue living and working as a blacksmith. I wouldn't be completely useless, but custom models were out of the question without any magic to manipulate.

Anne sighed. "Well, I expected that to be your answer."

Silence fell over the room again, broken only by the sound of the roiling water. I got up and poured two cups of hot water, adding a splash of brandy into each.

"Here."

"Thank you."

I sat back down and took a sip of my very, very weak brandy. Anne followed suit. It was so quiet that I thought I could hear her swallow.

Suddenly, she burst out laughing.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not laughing at you, Eizo." She took another swallow of her drink. "Up until a few minutes ago, I was hoping you would return with me, but when you refused, I found that a part of me was relieved."

I didn't respond.

"To tell the truth," she continued, "I was ordered by my father to 'bring that man back, even if you have to seduce him with your body.'"

Cough! I choked on my drink.

No, no, no, no. No matter how far down in the line of succession she was, we were still talking about an imperial princess! I suppose the emperor wouldn't

have sent a woman if he hadn't held such expectations, but still...

"That's going too far," I finally responded.

"In the end, I couldn't do it," she admitted. "Walking to your room...I was terrified."

"Of course you were. You have to treasure yourself."

I wasn't sure how old Anne was, but that didn't matter. There was no age at which a woman should be treated with such disregard, at least in my opinion. Even if in this world, in this time, women were seen as bargaining chips.

"You have a good heart, Eizo," Anne murmured.

"No, not at all," I replied.

Besides my family, I didn't treat anyone with any particular favor. Camilo and Marius weren't family, but I regarded them as close friends. I was on good terms with Sandro and Miss Frederica as well, but that was partially out of self-interest.

Regardless, I suspected I would always help them, even if I were to lose out in the equation. The margrave, on the other hand, I was happy to leave to the dogs...no matter what trouble he got involved in.

In any case, the empire had been planning to force me into submission. If they had selected an agent with *that* strategy in mind, it wasn't difficult to see why Anne had been sent; few people in the world possessed both beauty *and* strength. Strangely enough, there were several in this household.

"Will going home empty-handed put you in a tough position?" I asked.

Anne nodded and replied honestly, "Indeed."

"In that case, shall I send him a message?" I suggested.

"You can write?" she asked, taken aback. But she soon regained her footing. "Right. You can use magic, so why wouldn't you be able to write?"

Being able to wield magic was proof of an advanced education. It was unthinkable that such a person would be illiterate. At least, in this world.

I fetched paper and a writing utensil from my room then returned to my seat

and spread the paper out on the table. It was made of thin plant fibers, but I didn't know anything more specific than that. Its edges weren't clean-cut, but slightly rough and raw.

"Now then, what should I say?" I mused.

"The bare minimum that the empire requests of you is this: 'lend your aid to the kingdom no more than necessary,'" Anne explained.

"I don't want to appear as if I'm favoring a particular side either, so I have no objections to that," I reasoned. "However, should my friends befall any harm, I won't take it lying down."

"That shouldn't be a problem."

In the empire's eyes, they were blocking off a potential threat by stopping me from making mountains of custom models for the kingdom.

Since Anne and I were in agreement, I put pen to paper to record our conclusion.

"Your handwriting..." Anne remarked. "It's quite refined."

"Is that so?" I asked.

"Yes."

In truth, I had no idea whether my own handwriting was neat or not. After all, I had rarely set eyes on any written material in this world. I'd seen plenty of store signs, but many of them had no words.

"You can wield magic and write beautifully, so you must have undergone extensive schooling. How is it possible that I know nothing about your lineage?" Anne questioned. She narrowed her eyes. They were normally sleepy-looking, but they now resembled the eyes of a bird of prey locking on to its target.

"It's a long and complicated story," I responded. "I'm sure you can imagine that, judging from the fact that I am now a blacksmith who lives the life of a near recluse."

The conclusion she came to was a natural one: a well-educated person would've come from such a prestigious family that, even if they tried, they'd be unable to hide their background. Not even the youngest child out of ten siblings

could escape that kind of pedigree.

One could possibly conceal the truth by squirreling a noble child away in a commoner's household immediately after they were born (the way Helen had been). However, anyone who'd received schooling on magic had likely grown up as nobility. Had such a child been moved from one noble family to another, there would've been no hiding which household they'd ended up in either.

However, my case was different from all of these scenarios—no mortal was going to suspect that I had actually been born in another world entirely. Telling the honest-to-goodness truth when asked would be meaningless.

"In any case, let me finish this letter. Let's see... I'm declining the invitation, but would the emperor expect me to at least express my appreciation?"

"No. I do not think that father will care," answered Anne. "He dislikes platitudes."

"I see."

So, I kept it simple, writing something to the effect of, "*My services are available to you, but since I have friends in the kingdom, moving is out of the question.*" Of course, I included the requisite level of courtesy.

"What's left?" I muttered. As I thought, I rested the end of the pen on my chin. I wasn't drafting a diplomatic document; this was private correspondence, so what I had written should serve as ample enough commitment.

"Oh, I know."

At the end, I added, "If Your Majesty visits our workshop in person, I will forge you a weapon according to your specifications." Needless to say, I chose my words carefully so that they would not cause offense.

I placed my pen down on the table. "That should be good enough for the body of the letter." I was reading over what I had written, making sure I hadn't left anything out or said anything unnecessary, when I was struck by a realization. "Now that I'm thinking about it, isn't it a little presumptuous for a common blacksmith like me to send a missive to the emperor by way of an imperial princess?"

“It’s fine,” Anne replied. “Things might have been different if we had successfully reeled you in, but this aligns with one of our goals too. I am merely a messenger.”

“If you say so.”

I waited for the ink to dry before rolling up the letter and handing it to Anne. Since it was a letter, I’d written down my own name and the intended recipient, but there was no other identifying information.

If the message fell into the wrong hands, Anne and I could both play innocent. After all, we each had no choice but to trust in the other.

Anne took the letter. “Thank you very much.” Her eyes were narrowed into crescent moons, but unlike before, she was smiling.

Message in hand, Anne returned to the guest room.

“Time for me to turn in too...” I muttered.

It had grown quite late. At this point, I wouldn’t be able to sleep for very long before it was time to get up. However, I had learned in my previous life to take every precious chance to sleep, even if it was only for an hour.

I was just about to open my door when I noticed something out of the ordinary. I stopped with my hand on the doorknob.

Someone was hovering down the corridor where the other’s rooms were.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” I asked.

“No,” the person replied in a low voice, walking up to me.

“Could it be that you were listening?”

“Yes.”

Her responses were short. I wondered what she had thought. I debated asking, but she volunteered her thoughts herself.

“You have no intention of leaving this place, do you, Eizo?”

“I don’t plan on it. I’ve washed up here, so I might as well stay.”

Her voice was soft and delicate, which was one of her defining characteristics.

She wasn't one to chatter loudly and often stayed in the background...but in reality, she was far from a wallflower.

"Not even if I were to invite you to live in the woods with us elves?"

"Well...no. Not even then," I replied. "Though, I must admit that it's an enticing proposition."

"Really?"

"Yes, to the point that I am tempted to accept." I knew I was making a troubled face.

She—Lidy—placed a hand on my chest. Warmth bloomed in the shape of her palm. She chuckled. "I couldn't resist teasing you," she admitted. "I consider this place my home and everyone here my family. Good night."



With a gentle smile, she turned and headed back to her own room. I scratched my head and reached for my door. Then, realization struck like lightning.

“Could she have been offering me an escape in case something were to happen?” I mumbled. Of course, no answer came in response to my query.

The scent of the forest, heightened by the falling rain, tickled my nose.

###

The next morning, I peeked outside to find that the rain had weakened to the point where most people (in my previous world) would’ve been torn about whether to open an umbrella or not. It wouldn’t be any trouble to see Anne off in this drizzle, and I’d be able to fetch water from the lake today too.

I walked over to Krul and Lucy’s hut. The two of them were both excited to see me.

We didn’t spend time with them yesterday after all. Rain or no rain, I should take them along when we escort Anne out of the forest.

All three of us went to the lake together. The rain hadn’t completely stopped, so we still got a bit damp. However, it was much better than two days ago. I towed Krul and Lucy dry afterward.

Before I went back into the cabin, I told them, “I’ll be back later.”

Krul trilled, “*Kululululululu*,” and Lucy barked brightly. Both of them were full of energy.

Our little ladies sure are spunky.

Over breakfast, I told Anne that I would accompany her on her way back. “After we eat, I’ll escort you to the forest entrance.”

“Yes, please.”

I turned to the others. “The rest of you are coming along too, right?”

Everyone agreed. Thus, it was decided that the entirety of Forge Eizo would be going out together.

After breakfast, we all changed into rain gear—which meant adding an extra

outer coat on top of our normal city traveling clothes—and then regrouped.

Anne had strapped the greatsword to her back. The rest of us were armed with our own weapons. With the rain, I thought that wolves and the like should be sequestered in their dens, but there was bound to be one or two predators wandering around, just like the black bear we'd run into soon after I'd come to this world.

Krul and Lucy were waiting outside, the latter a bundle of excitement. Diana calmed the young wolf down, and we all set off together.

The rain was light today, and inside the forest, there was plenty of cover. We were able to stay drier than I had expected. However, a few heavy raindrops, blown around by the rain, still made it through here and there, plopping loudly on our mantles.

"Kulululu," Krul chirruped. Her greater size meant that she was a larger target. She made a sound every time she was struck by the rain, possibly because it was ticklish.

I felt like I was in an anime movie.

As for Lucy, she was now running around freely. Apparently, she had whined enough that Diana had given up on trying to control her. She didn't mind the slipperiness of the ground at all. In fact, she was covered in so much mud that it was impossible to see the original color of her fur. I was going to have to wash her thoroughly when we got home.

"How did you find your way here in the first place?" I asked Anne as we walked. "Only a select few people know the location of the forge."

Had the empire conducted an investigation, or had they approached Camilo with an exchange?

"That's...a secret," Anne responded.

Her answer was predictable in a sense—I hadn't truly expected her to tell me. There was no reason for Anne to reveal the empire's investigation or negotiation capabilities, whichever it was.

I huffed, subtly signaling both my displeasure and my acceptance. Then, I

looked up at the green ceiling (albeit a very leaky one) from where the occasional raindrop pittered down.

“The weather’s better today, but if the rains drag out any longer, even the wolves are going to get bored,” I commented.

“Probably,” Samya said. “And the deer too. The first sunny day after the storms, you see a lot of them just standing around in a daze.”

“Are they easier to hunt?” I wondered. “Do they lose their sense of caution?”

“Yeah. They overlook warning signs they’d normally notice. That’s the time of year when my people learn to hunt.”

“I see.”

Deer were wary animals with a sharp sense of smell. Their hearing and vision were no better than a human’s, but to flip that statement on its head, they were just as vigilant as humans could be. A hunter could be considered a master if they were skilled enough to bag one deer in a three-day hunt. Our hunters were able to take one down in a single day largely because of the knowledge and know-how possessed by Samya, who had lived in the Black Forest for five years—as long as she’d been alive.

If deer were easy to hunt from our perspective, then catching one was likely child’s play for wolves and bears too. That might very well be the reason wolves gave birth around this time.

We continued chatting about animals’ behaviors after the rainy season, taking our time walking through the trees. Right as we were nearing the border of the forest, Anne cut in and said, “Excuse me...about the payment for the commission...”

“Oh.” I had completely forgotten. If only one of the others had reminded me.

“You said I could name my price, right?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s normally how we settle the account.”

“In that case...” Anne rustled through her clothing and took out a leather pouch. It was on the larger side and looked heavy. If the contents were coins, then they would add up to a sizable amount. Perhaps bribery had been a

strategy they had considered.

Since I'd said I wouldn't take payment until after—and that it was a pay-what-you-want system—Anne had possibly drawn the conclusion that I wasn't interested in money. That wasn't far from the truth.

"Here," she said, removing a few gold coins from the pouch and handing them to me. The whole pouch would've been overkill.

I took the coins. This wasn't the first time I'd handled gold coins, but these were somehow different. I found myself scrutinizing them unconsciously.

"These are great gold coins from the empire. Each is worth roughly five of the gold coins used in the kingdom," Anne explained.

They were certainly larger. Heavier too, maybe because they were more pure. She had given me ten coins, which meant that she'd paid me the equivalent of fifty gold coins in the kingdom's currency. It was ample payment for the work. The greatsword was immense but had been simple to make.

"Thank you for your patronage," I recited, slipping the coins into my own pocket.

How does currency exchange work? I'll ask Camilo next time. Asking anyone else would look downright suspicious.

"We're almost there," Lidy said softly, her voice nearly drowned out by the rain. We could just make out the road beyond the outskirts of the trees.

And so, we all strolled leisurely to the entrance of the forest. Or at least, what we always referred to as the "entrance." In reality, the trees were only slightly less dense here compared to the surroundings.

"This is far eno—" Anne began to say, but Samya cut her off, stepping in front of the party.

"I smell blood," Samya stated. Her voice was soft but forceful.

My nose wasn't picking up anything. Because of the rain, any scent would be drastically diluted, but Samya had noticed it anyway.

"Someone's here," she added.

I hesitated, but at Samya's words, Helen unsheathed her swords—both the one on her back and the one on her hip. She then nodded. "Yeah."

So Helen had sensed something too. Samya hadn't been imagining things. She readied her bow, and I slid *Diaphanous Ice* from its sheath. The trio of appoitakara swords—Helen's dual blades and my katana—glowed faintly blue through the haze.

I was only now realizing that these weapons would disadvantage us at night...but it was too little too late.

Diana watched us and drew her sword as well—Lidy removed her bow from her back. Rike retreated with Krul and Lucy, but they stayed close; they were apt to become targets if they broke from the group completely.

"We know you're there! Show yourselves or we'll shoot!" Helen yelled, loud enough that my ears were practically ringing by the end.

Samya drew her bow, backing up Helen's threat. Instinctively, those two were moving in sync with one another. Despite the tense situation, I found myself admiring them.

A short time passed; our attackers were hesitating over what to do. But then, five people appeared, dressed in light green from head to toe. Their faces were hidden. Overall, they gave the impression of ninjas. Surely they wouldn't show their full hand so easily, so it was safer to assume there were another two or three waiting in the shadows.

"Let me confirm just in case," I said to Anne. "They aren't here to escort you home, are they?" All the while, I was thinking, *Even if they are escorts, they're one-hundred-percent here to escort her to the afterlife.*

Anne's answer was a furious shake of her head.

"Hand her over. Play nice and we'll spare you," demanded one of the green-clothed ambushers. The voice was that of a man. I didn't know whether they were sent from the kingdom or the empire, but it appeared that their aim was Anne and Anne alone.

"You can't possibly think we'd hand over our valuable guest to you so easily," I retorted.

The truth was a bit contrary to my words—logically, Anne was nothing more than a simple visitor, so there was no need for us to risk ourselves to protect her. Even so... No matter what it cost us, our relationship with Anne wasn't so shallow that I would surrender her to these fishy thugs, not when we'd gotten to know her.

Hearing my reply, the men brandished their weapons. They were carrying blades that were between the length of a knife and a shortsword. Liquid dripped from the tips. It could have been poison; it could have been the rain. I couldn't tell.

Picking a fight was good and all, but what now? I was a craftsman, not a merchant. I may have had a good eye, but I didn't have the skills to move inventory after I'd picked it out. I should've asked for sales-related cheats while I'd had the chance.

Nevertheless, it wasn't an option to throw up our hands and say, "Never mind, you can have her."

"Diana, Lidy, Rike, you three take Anne, Krul, and Lucy home," I ordered. "Samya, Helen, and I will take care of this. If none of us return...abandon the house and go straight to the capital." The others hesitated, but I shouted, "Hurry! Go now!" They made up their minds, nodded, and turned to do as I had commanded.

The five green-clad men (there could've been women in their midst too) started to follow, but we blocked their way. I lifted my katana.

Time to fight our way out of this mess.

The rain was coming down more heavily now, no longer a mere drizzle. It would've been difficult for Anne to return to the empire today, even if we hadn't been stopped.

"Five against three," I muttered. "Though there could be more of them."

"Piece o' cake, right?" Helen quipped.

Our opponents showed no signs of uncertainty. I thought I might've been able to trick them into revealing anyone hiding in the shadows, but apparently they

weren't complete idiots.

To Helen, I replied, "Maybe for you, but I'm an amateur."

She smirked. "Whatever you say, hotshot."

But I wasn't kidding. In terms of actual battle experience, I really was a novice.

The men closed ranks and drew nearer. Samya took a step back for every step they came forward. I was counting on her to deal with anyone who tried to pursue the others. Long distance was her specialty after all.

Our attackers stopped just out of my katana's reach. "This is your last warning. Let us through."

"Like we'll just drop our weapons and say, 'Yes, sir, go on through.' Do you think us fools? How rude."

The men said nothing further—they answered by charging toward us, their weapons aloft.

"Whoops, none of that." I responded in kind, slashing my katana at an incoming attacker. He brought up his long, daggerlike blade to block, but *Diaphanous Ice* cut straight through the metal. Without pause, I whipped the katana up toward my opponent's chest. He darted back just in time, and my blade swept through thin air.

"Tsk. Northern weapons are no joke," he cursed to himself.

He was familiar with the characteristics of a katana. *Diaphanous Ice's* blade emitted a faint blue light, so no doubt he'd sussed out that the sword was special. But, I was sure his estimates of its strength were off by an order of magnitude.

He tossed aside his dagger, now missing half its blade, and drew a backup long dagger.

"Now let me give you a warning," I said. "If you want to run, best do it now."

The men hesitated for a split second, most likely calculating whether their advantage in numbers was enough to earn them a win. Letting these men go might mean trouble down the line, but it'd also give us time to work out countermeasures. Ideally, they would run.

Yet, in the end, they refused to lower their weapons.

In that case, we weren't going to go easy on them. I glanced at Samya out of the corner of my eye. She dipped her head in response.

A second man came to back up my opponent. Two versus one. The other three were desperately fending off Helen's flurry of attacks. Lightning Strike didn't have any serious intention of finishing them off just yet—she was merely keeping them occupied. They weren't going to break past, not on her watch.

Three opponents, and she barely needs to try. She thoroughly deserves her nickname.

It was my turn to take the offense. I darted in toward the two men, sweeping my sword in a broad horizontal arc. They quickly retreated as I had expected them to. I surrendered to the inertia of my swing and pivoted my body sideways.

Something hard and sharp sliced past my head. Samya had let loose an arrow. It flew toward the two men. After they'd narrowly dodged my attack, they'd yet to regain their footing. Samya had aimed for the head of the man who'd first attacked me. He didn't try to dodge. I figured he must've been wearing protective headgear.

That might've been enough to stop a normal arrow, but...

"Gyaaah—?!" the man howled.

Samya's arrow pierced his head. She wasn't carrying normal arrows, but rather, my custom-made ones. They were extremely sturdy and hard enough to penetrate the thick skulls of forest boars. A bit of armor wasn't going to be able to block it.

I leaned into my turn, reorienting toward my opponents while sinking into a crouch. From my low stance, I slashed my katana at the second man's lower body. A flash of blue light ripped through his legs.

"Guh—" he groaned.

I stopped turning and launched into another attack—not at the man I'd just cut through, but at the one with the arrow in his head. I suspected that he was

their leader.

The arrow had bitten deep. He might have already been dead. And even if he wasn't, even if we let him go, it wouldn't be long before he took his last breath. Nonetheless...

Blue light ripped through his neck. His head flew from his body, landing on the ground with a heavy thud.

"I'm done over here!" I yelled to, of course, Helen.

Her eyes were gleaming. At this moment, she looked more like a beast than Samya.

She heard me. In the next second, twin streaks of blue lightning tore through the remaining three men. They all collapsed on the muddy ground, water splashing up around them.

"Done?" I asked.

"Done. They're dead. No need for a finishing blow."

"Got it."

Helen and I kept our conversation brief. There was little need for words. The two of us approached the green-clad attacker I'd crippled—he was still lying where he had fallen. At least, I assumed the person was a "he" based on the voice I'd heard earlier. It could've been a woman...but our ambusher's gender was far from important right now.

I didn't think I had cut a major artery, but the wound was deep. He would've had difficulty moving. I set a foot on his shoulder to pin him down before I kicked away the sword in his hand. Then, I flicked my naked blade to cast off the blood. The rain had already washed away some of it.

"Now then, I'm sure you know what I want to say."

The presumed man didn't respond. The best outcome for us would be if he blabbed right now, but it looked like things weren't going to be so easy.

"Who sent you?" I demanded.

"You think I'm gonna answer that?" he spat.

“So that’s how it’s gonna be.” People whose lips became loose when backed into a corner wouldn’t have been sent on this mission in the first place.

Helen slipped quietly forward, raised her sword, and plunged it deep into the man’s thigh.

“Guh...” he groaned, but the defiance in his eyes peering out from within his mask didn’t dim.

His brazen gaze provoked Helen to twist her sword in his wound with a brutal jerk of her wrist. It pained me to watch.

Yet, the man kept his silence. Helen brought her other sword to kiss his neck. Implicit in the touch was a final warning: *you will not get a second chance.*

The blade cut into the man’s skin. The fresh blood that welled up was washed away by the rain.

His eyes narrowed.

He was smiling.

No! Could he have...?!

“Shit!” I gasped, lurching forward to stop him, but his eyes were already rolling back.

Helen had apparently noticed what’d happened, for she withdrew her sword. I pressed two fingers against his neck but felt no pulse.

“Poison,” she remarked.

“Probably.”

A fast-acting one, if that were the case. We would most likely be able to find the details with a little digging, but more importantly, our last avenue for information was now gone. Honestly though, I hadn’t expected him to simply offer up what we wanted to know.

Once the rainy season was over and we ventured back to the city, it was crucial that we not bring trouble to Camilo’s doorstep...

“For the time being, let’s clean up here,” I said.

“Right,” Helen agreed.

Samya chimed in too. “Got it.”

We dragged the bodies of the five men deeper into the forest. Then, we erased the traces of the battle from the ground using makeshift brooms cut from branches with leaves still attached to them.

The pouring rain eased up, almost as if to drag me out of the black mood brought on by the day’s misfortune.

Once we finished covering our tracks, I asked Helen, “Which do you think it was?”

I was referring to our attackers’ identities. If they had been gunning for Helen, they most likely would’ve been from the empire. But in this case, Anne had been their target.

Leaving aside how they’d known that the seventh imperial princess had come to the kingdom in the first place, the suspicion naturally fell on the kingdom, but the likelihood that they had been from the empire was also too big to ignore.

Helen shrugged. “I don’t know. Could be either—kingdom or empire. And from the empire, considering the risk involved, *both* possibilities are plausible.”

“What about the republic?” I asked.

“Not impossible,” she replied. “But if they were caught out, they would have incurred the wrath of both the kingdom and the empire.”

“You think they’d want to avoid a two-versus-one situation?”

“I certainly would.”

“Says the woman who took down three opponents without batting an eye,” I retorted.

“Only because I had no choice.”

“Yeah, well, true enough.”

Given Helen’s background—not as the secret child of the margrave, but as a farrier’s daughter—she wouldn’t have received formal education, but that didn’t mean she was stupid. She was even literate.

Regardless of her prowess which had earned her the title Lightning Strike, and although her skills were leagues above her opponents', she would never have deliberately chosen to put herself at a disadvantage.

"What do you mean when you say '*both* possibilities'?" Samya asked with a puzzled expression.

Political scheming wasn't a skill needed in beastfolk society. According to Samya, the highest position in her community was at most the head of a gathering—in other words, about the same prestige as the chairman of a merchant's association in a small town—so she knew little about the machinations of the aristocracy.

"Basically, if the assassins were from the empire, then they could be remnants of the rebels behind the revolution, or perhaps sent by the nobility," I explained. "It could even be someone from the imperial household. However, they wouldn't have been able to make any moves themselves in kingdom territory—if caught, they'd risk complicating the two nations' relationship. So, in that case, this group would've likely had help from someone in the kingdom. Hence, *both*—the men could've been sent by someone from the empire *or* the kingdom."

"Imperial household..." Samya murmured. "As in, Anne's brothers or sisters?"

"That's right," I replied.

"Princesses don't have it easy."

"Yeah, I agree."

"Well, what about Diana?" she asked.

"Don't you remember the incident that caused her to come live with us?"

"Oh, right."

"Just imagine that dispute, but bigger—big enough to involve other nations—and you'll be on the right track," I said.

"I think I get it..." With her arms crossed, Samya nodded a few times to show that she was satisfied by my explanation.

Just then, another theory crossed my mind. "Hold on. Couldn't the republic

have wanted to cause mayhem between the kingdom and the empire?”

Helen shot down my hypothesis. “It would have been quicker to just assassinate Anne in that case. They could’ve jumped her, slit her throat, and run off. With a group of five, at least one would’ve escaped. The fact that they didn’t do it means they wanted her alive.”

“I see.” This time, it was my turn to nod.

That being said, we still had too little information. Camilo, Marius, and possibly even the margrave might end up getting involved, so I wanted to figure out at least a general approach for us to follow.

“Let’s discuss it later. First, we should go back to the others,” I suggested.

Samya and Helen nodded firmly, and we dashed back into the forest through the rain. We deliberately made a lot of noise. Most animals in this forest would run away from the sound, and the others in the family would be able to hear us coming. We wanted to alert them that someone was headed their way.

Samya wasn’t with them, so they wouldn’t be able to tell who was following by smell. This time, it was the three of us, but we could have just as easily been attackers. If anything, I hoped they would stay on their guard. That would be more reassuring.

Just when I was thinking that we should have almost caught up to them, a tiny shadow came bursting through the bushes. Samya, Helen, and I were all slow to react. We didn’t sense any hostility.

That shadow was none other than...

“*Arf!*” came the cute greeting.

That was right! *Lucy* would be able to tell who was coming. She had an even better sense of smell than Samya and should remember scents she had been exposed to before.

Beneath the falling rain, I picked up Lucy. Her wagging tail sped up.

“All right, let’s go home together,” I declared.

“*Bark! Bark!*”

A chuckle burst out of Helen, who was watching our antics.

The fact that Lucy had come to pick us up meant that everyone else should've been nearby. We picked up the pace.

Before long, we saw the rest of the family. Our cabin was only a little farther.

"Heeey!" I yelled loudly.

They turned to look our way. The tallest was naturally Krul, but Anne, who was far from short, stood out from the crowd too. Unfortunately, that meant she was an easy target for pursuers.

"Is everyone all right?" I asked.

"Yes, nothing happened to us," Diana answered. "What about you?"

"No injuries here. We cleaned up."

"I see. That's good. We were worried since Lucy ran off all of a sudden."

"She probably smelled me coming," I said.

No one had chased after the others. I definitely thought that the attackers would've had one or two people lying low.

Don't tell me...

"I'm sure you all want to go home immediately, but let's search our surroundings and erase any tracks," I declared. "I don't think there's anyone else following us, but let's make sure of it. Helen, Samya, and Diana, you're with me. Lucy too. Everyone else, stay here. Be patient."

It would be too predictable if we went home now and were ambushed while asleep. Lucy was calm, so I was pretty sure we were safe. However, when it came to matters of life or death, better safe than sorry.

We probed the area slowly and thoroughly, searching for anything out of the ordinary. The women (including Lucy) ranged out in front and I guarded the rear while sweeping away our tracks with a branch I'd snapped off.

After we circled the area once, I asked, "Find anything?"

"Nah, nothing," Samya answered.

“Same here,” Helen agreed.

Diana added, “Me too.”

“*Ruff!*” barked Lucy.

No one had noticed anything suspicious. We could see the dim figures of the other three we’d left behind in the distance, and we headed back to them. Of course, we diligently hid our footprints as we went.

Anne was one thing, but Lidy and Rike had limited combat abilities. In short, our main firepower was gathered around me. There was no better time for our enemies to turn the tables, but we saw no unusual movements. Apparently, the five men had actually come alone.

“All right, then let’s go home,” I declared.

Everyone shouted their agreement, and we made our way back to the cabin.

The first thing we did when we returned was lead Krul and Lucy to their hut and clean the mud off their bodies with water from the cistern (it had filled up more than I’d expected). Lucy shook her body to dry off her fur, splashing water all over us, but since we were already wet from the rain, nobody really minded.

Afterward, we dried the two of them with towels.

They’d been slaving for us day after day on end... The *towels*, that is. *We’ll have to buy more.*

And so, we put the aborted escort mission and narrow escape behind us. However, we had to figure out our counterattack.

With the grim flames of resolution burning in my heart, I shut the front door with a bang.

Back in the cabin, the whole family plus Anne wiped ourselves off and changed into dry clothing. We then regrouped in the living area.

I lit the stove, boiled a pot of water, and distributed cups of hot water with a splash of brandy to the others. No one spoke a word in the meantime.

Once we were all seated with our drinks in hand, I broached the subject on everyone’s mind. “So, what do we do now?” Everyone’s eyes snapped to me.

“Is it possible that whoever was behind this will give up after today’s defeat?”

Helen shot me down flat. “No, definitely not. If they were determined to settle everything today, they would’ve sent more men, assuming they know how strong me and Eizo are. The fact that they didn’t means—”

“—they can only afford to send a few men at a time,” I said, finishing her thought.

This time, Helen nodded.

After all, it was foolish to split up your forces on purpose. If you had ten men to dispatch against an opponent who could win against nine, dividing the men into two groups of five and sending them in succession would guarantee you two losses. The only logical tactic was to send all ten at once. That was the highly abbreviated explanation.

There was no way the orchestrator wouldn’t have been aware of the drawbacks of splitting their forces, so the only explanation was that something prevented them from deploying a large group at once.

“Maybe they’re from the empire and their options are limited,” Helen suggested. “Or maybe sending more men out of the capital, where the streets have eyes and ears, would draw too much attention.”

“Hmmm. Do you have any idea who might have done this?” I looked at Anne with my arms folded. “It...looks like you have a mountain of them, actually.”

“Yes, with my position being what it is,” she answered. “The sun would set before I finished listing all the possible suspects.” Her tone was stony and emotionless, which could’ve been because she was used to these kinds of situations or perhaps because she hadn’t fully processed the events of the day.

She might have been the seventh imperial princess with several successors in line before her, but she was still of royal blood. Her very existence could be either a hindrance or a boon. The empire had nobility. Apart from the aristocrats, there must have been people in her very household she suspected, whether she wanted to or not.

“Who is the most high-risk person on your list?” I asked.

“Out of everyone, I’d have to say Vladmir, my elder brother.”

“One of your family, eh?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her eyes firm. “He bears no love for those of us with mixed blood. However, he does not usually show his distaste openly, and my brother Leopold keeps him in check, so he is still active in the empire’s political sphere. After all, it would be disgraceful for the second son to be entirely uninvolved with the empire’s affairs.”

“Ah, I see. Yes, that is tricky.”

“Right?”

We looked at each other and traded smiles. Though we weren’t any closer to resolving the mystery, it was still important to keep our chins up. The moment we lost our spirit, we were done for.

“But would he try something so obvious?” I asked.

Anne cocked her head. “No. That isn’t like Vladmir at all.”

“Could he have allied with someone from the kingdom?”

“For example?” prompted Anne.

“As you may know, Count Eimoor is within our forge’s circle of close acquaintances. We have also had dealings with Margrave Menzel.”

“Members of the kingdom’s ruling faction I see.”

What? Really?

I was surprised since I didn’t pay much attention to details like that, but I nodded, keeping my expression neutral. Samya and Diana likely saw right through me, judging by the way their faces twisted.

Anne continued. “Then certainly, there’s a possibility that he solicited the help of an aristocrat who wants to topple the dominant faction.”

“Exactly. That being said, all of this is just supposition. Next time we go to deliver our wares to our merchant partner, I’ll talk with him about the situation. It’s vital for us to gather more accurate information.”

“Isn’t it risky to leave here?”

“Yes, that’s true. However, we shouldn’t have anything to worry about as long as the target of their search isn’t with us. That is to say, if you stay behind, Anne,” I explained.

“I understand,” she replied.

There was still a fair chance we would get attacked anyway, but Diana, Helen, and I would be going along—the three of us should be strong enough to drive away most people.

“In any case,” I continued, “I apologize for the inconvenience, but you will have to stay with us a little while longer.”

She smiled. “Yes, that is fine.”

There was one more possibility I couldn’t get out of my head: could this all have been one big farce to bring about our exact situation?

While I hadn’t been paying attention, the rain had strengthened into a deluge. It was nearly as strong as it had been yesterday. Maybe that was why the atmosphere in the room was so gloomy.

“Ahem.” In order to lighten the mood, I tried my hardest to keep my voice bright as I announced, “Shall we do some work?”

“At a time like this?” Samya questioned.

“We have too little information at the moment. There’s no use fretting ourselves silly over something we don’t understand,” I stated. “In this case, it’s best to focus on work and lift our moods, even if it’s by force.”

This was a trick that’d helped me survive over a decade as a slave in a black corporation...though I couldn’t deny that it had also been used as a tool for exploitation.

I heaved a sigh as I opened the door to the workshop, then hurried around the space, lighting the forge and firebed. The rest of my family set up, and Anne watched us all intently.

I finally asked, “Anne...do you want to help?”

“May I?”

“Sure. We won’t be doing anything complicated today. As long as you’re fine with that.”

Anne’s face brightened, driving away the vacant expression in her eyes from a moment ago. “Okay!”

“Can you give Anne an apron?” I asked Rike.

“Sure, Boss,” she replied.

We only had ones sized for humans—short folks, in other words. It looked a little lumpy on Anne’s frame, but it afforded her at least *some* protection.

“We’ll have you make the molds,” I instructed. “Lidy, can you show her how?”

“Yes,” replied Lidy.

With her slim and delicate hands, Lidy began to demonstrate how to shape the clay around the model of the sword. Her every movement was graceful, as if she were playing an instrument.

Alongside Lidy, Anne watched and tried to replicate the task. Anne’s hands were large. They weren’t quite double the size of Lidy’s, but the size difference was like a mother’s to a child’s.

They looked no different from the hands of a regular young woman, except that they were clearly bigger. With those hands, Anne’s movements gave off an impression of grandeur as she pressed the clay around the model.

Rike and I watched while she got rolling before turning to our own work. The schedule for the day was to first forge knives from plate metal and then cast swords from the molds.

When I was polishing off my first knife, Anne spoke, her voice resounding in the workshop, “How is this?”

Lidy checked her work and replied, “We won’t know until we actually fill the mold, but it looks all right. I don’t see any particular problems with it.”

As long as Lidy is keeping an eye on things, nothing major should go awry. I returned my attention to the knife I was working on.

We worked for several hours, and then, after a quiet lunch with few words

exchanged, it was afternoon. Time to use the mold Anne made to cast a sword. My turn came after the cast was removed from the mold.

I could have left the work to Rike, but I wanted to oversee the first sword myself in order to check the quality. Therefore, I decided to do it properly and see the sword to completion.

“Ready? I’m gonna start pouring,” Samya announced, holding a smelting ladle containing molten steel by its long handle. She was in charge because, one, it was a good learning opportunity for Anne, and two, the liquid metal was over 1,000°C and dangerous to handle.

Samya poured the contents of the ladle smoothly into the mold, which belched out smoke even as it drank up the red-hot steel. After it cooled slightly, I unmolded the sword and tapped it lightly with my hammer. Bits of clay that had hardened because of the heat of the metal cracked and crumbled off the blade. The core of the sword hadn’t cooled completely—it was still hot to handle with my bare hands, so I picked it up with tongs.

“H-How does it look...?” Anne asked nervously, glancing up through her lashes (though the effect was undermined by her height).

I smiled. “Pretty good, pretty good. Given the quality, I shouldn’t have any trouble finishing it up.”

“Yes!” cheered Anne, high-fiving Lidy.

These mundane, ordinary moments were the most important. Danger may have been waiting for us around the corner, but I was determined to protect our everyday lives.

That resolution burned in my heart as I brought my hammer down on the sword to smooth out the inevitable burrs that had been formed in the casting process. From there, I continued straight to the final stages of the process. Since this was her first try, she had cast a shortsword. I wavered briefly over whether to prioritize speed or quality, but since this was a good opportunity, I decided to make it an elite model.

I hammered the blade to imbue it with magic. With every blow, sparks leaped up into the air, accompanied by a shower of twinkling mystery particles.

According to Lidy, they were the traces of magical essence that failed to enter the sword; normally, they were invisible unless you were used to manipulating magic.

Recently, Rike had remarked, “I can see the magic when I watch you work, Boss, but only just a little.” The day she would be able to see the particles clearly wasn’t so far out.

Ultimately, I was able to finish off the blade with ease. The steel had been poured well (in casting, the skill of the pourer affected the quality of the final product) and the mold had been made well. I then quenched the sword and wrapped the hilt with leather. The last step was to hone the blade. Normally, we sharpened the swords in batches, but I made an exception for this one.

Quality-wise, the finished sword was on the upper end of elite models. It didn’t make the cut for a custom model, but that was neither here nor there.

Even in my eyes, it was a superb sword, a piece I could boast about. If I were to sell this sword as a stand-alone product, it could very well fetch one and a half times the normal price.

I held the newly cast sword over my head. The reflected flames from the firebed and furnace played along its length, and the steel glittered orange.

I presented the sword to Anne. “It’s complete. Scabbard notwithstanding.”

She paused her work on the molds to look at the sword, her distinctive downturned eyes gleaming. “This was made from the mold I...?”

“Yes. This sword was cast from molten steel using the mold you made with your very hands.”

“Can I...touch it?” she asked hesitantly.

I glanced briefly at Helen, who had been watching our conversation. When she saw me looking, she gave me a tiny nod.

“Sure, feel free,” I replied.

Anne wiped her hands with a piece of cloth and slowly reached for the blade. Given how she’d wielded the greatsword I’d made her, she certainly had swordplay experience. However, from the caution she was exhibiting now, one

would've thought this was the first time in her entire life she'd picked up a weapon.

"Oh, wow," she gasped breathlessly. Her reaction was endearing. The glimmer in her eyes grew even brighter.

To me, she looked like a child who'd gotten a toy they'd been wishing for. Sequestered out here in the woods, this might be the only time when she could completely forget her position as the seventh princess of the empire.

Diana was the same way. Here, she wasn't the sister to Count Eimoor and a young lady of standing—she could act merely as a member of Forge Eizo, one member of our small family. But out in the world, regardless of her own wishes, she was not allowed to forget her own position.

Whenever—be it sooner or later—and however Anne leaves our forge, the heavy mantle of her rank would come, once again, to settle over her shoulders. Whenever I saw her discussing swordsmanship with Helen, I wanted nothing more than for the ordinary days we lived here to become even the smallest salvation from her destiny.

"This is the kind of work you all do day-to-day? Always?" Anne asked.

"Yes, more or less," I answered vaguely. I was hardly going to admit, "Shucks, no, we only just started a few months ago." That would be foolishly honest.

"I see. So, this is what my father desires."

Anne inspected the sword carefully. In the meantime, she had stopped working. However, it wasn't as if we could make our deliveries while the rains lasted anyway, so there was nothing wrong with taking it easy.

The rest of us watched Anne out of the corners of our eyes as we returned to our own tasks.

Night fell. The sun god had long turned in after his extended day of work. During the day, we had forged and cast a large number of knives and swords.

"The dinner menu's become predictably repetitive now that we can't go outside," I observed.

“That’s just how it is,” Samya replied. “Actually, we’re eating well enough, all things considered.”

Rike, Lidy, and Helen nodded in agreement, but Diana and Anne looked lost.

Samya continued, “For me and my kind, food and ingredients are slim pickings in this season.” She brought a bite of the salt-cured jerky in the soup to her mouth.

“Is it different for nobility?” Rike asked, swallowing a piece of meat. It was obvious she was curious. Which was good, because there was no reason to worry about why she was asking.

“Hmm, well...it may just be my family, but we eat the same as we always do,” Diana said. “Oh, but with fewer vegetables maybe.”

“It’s the same in my household,” Anne replied.

Both of them answered readily. I suppose there was no reason to hide this level of information.

“Apparently, the gourmands of the upper class have smokehouses on their grounds, but they’re the exception,” added Diana.

“We have one at my house,” Anne said. “For emergencies, if we ever have to preserve our own food.”

A collective “oooh” of appreciation came from the group. Anne’s expression was tinted with pride.

To put it bluntly, Anne’s “house” was a castle. In short, it had to function as the nucleus of the capital’s final stronghold. If the smokehouse was positioned close to the outer wall (as they usually were to make it more convenient to bring in firewood and bring out goods), it could be easily destroyed in a siege, so it was reassuring for there to be one in the inner fortress as well.

However, my guess was that it had been built to cater to the emperor’s hobby. A hut to store and burn charcoal was one thing—charcoal was an indispensable commodity—but a castle had little need for a private smokehouse.

I had no intention of buddying up to the emperor, but I felt a burst of kinship

at the lengths he'd gone to rationalize the pursuit of his hobby.

"The food smoked there must be too delicious for words," I said.

Anne stared at me blankly. "It's perfectly ordinary smoked food though?"

If Anne had been your typical sheltered well-to-do lady, there would've been a high chance that her "ordinary" was actually extraordinary from the perspective of an average joe...but this was *Anne* we were talking about. Her words still needed to be taken with a grain of salt, but generally speaking, our standards for what was ordinary were probably a little unconventional as well.

All I said in response was, "I see."

"The best part is that the food can be prepared quickly for my brothers and sisters to eat," Anne said. "And me as well."

I held myself back from looking at Anne. This was the wrong time to stare at a lady. It would've been a tad impolite.

It wouldn't have been impossible for regular people to obtain food that was smoked the day of (or slightly beforehand) if they made the effort.

After that, the focus of the conversation changed to smoked foods we'd eaten before and what they'd tasted like. And so, we passed the day's dinner.

###

In the end, the rains continued for three days. The downpour had weakened slightly, but nevertheless, it was best that we avoided going to the city until it stopped raining completely.

I replenished our water supply at the lake (and took Krul and Lucy on a walk) once the rains had let up enough to do so, but hunting was still impossible. We mostly focused on bulk-forging our usual lineup of weapons.

We found a task for Anne that she was more suited to than making molds: plate metal production. This was now her primary role.

Our metal plates were made by pouring steel into molds and letting it harden. They were generally all the same size, and we stacked them in something like a box. Or maybe it was better to describe the container as a fenced area? It might've been closest to kennels used for kittens and puppies.

Anyway, my point was that a few bumps, dents, or deviations from the standard plates were acceptable, but of course, the more level the metal was, the easier it would be to store and work with later. Therefore, the plates had to be hammered smooth by hand before they cooled completely. In the steelworks industry of my previous world, this step was done using a rolling mill.

We had Anne try her hand at it, and the metal plate came out well, perhaps because of her personality. In terms of sheer strength, Helen obviously had the upper hand, and Diana was still a cut above Anne as well. However, compared to the two of them, Anne was slightly more precise when it came to making the plates. Samya's work was even better, but since Anne was stronger, she was also faster.

I first noticed this when inspecting one of her finished plates.

"This one's well made. Good job," I told her honestly.

"Do you mean it?" She seemed pleased at my praise.

"Yes. It's easy to tell the difference when you stack them, see?"

I formed two stacks, each with the same number of plates—one had only the plates Anne had made, and one was without her plates. Anne's tower was the same height as the other, plus it stood straight up. When looking at a single plate, the difference was minuscule, but with ten-plus plates layered on top of one another, it was striking.

"You're right," agreed Anne.

"Well, we can't let such a rare talent go to waste. We're counting on you for the plate production, Anne."

"Leave it to me!" she declared, striking a power pose.

The forge resounded with the crackling of flames mingled with laughter. I was positive that, at that moment, everyone there forgot Anne was actually the seventh imperial princess—including Anne herself.

With Anne making plates, either Samya or Diana, who'd been in charge of the task before, would have to be allocated other work.

I've been meaning to have her try it out anyway. This is the perfect opportunity.

"Samya, why don't you have Rike teach you how to forge a knife?" I suggested.

Samya's eyes widened into round disks. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. That is, if Rike agrees to help. You must've picked up a few tricks for forging with steel while you've been hammering plates, right?" I turned to look at Rike. She responded with a resolute nod.

I was sorry to make the request of Rike while she had yet to fulfill her own goals, but I had no systematic approach to blacksmithing, so the best I could offer was allowing a student to observe me as I worked. Of course, I wasn't going to force a beginner to learn that way.

Rike got straight to work teaching Samya the ABC's of forging.

"Heh heh, from now on, I'm your disciple, Rike," Samya said with a laugh.

"I'm not advanced enough to be taking on my own apprentice."

For three days after that, the workshop was filled with the jolly tinging of hammers on metal mixed with the new sound of faltering but lively hammer strikes. On the fourth day, the rain was falling softly. According to Samya, the long storm would be over soon, so the drizzle would peter out before we knew it.

Honestly, who would've thought the rain would continue for over a whole week? It hadn't been pouring the entire time, but if it continued drizzling, I might've had to look into how Noah built his ark.

In the morning, I went to the lake for water, then everyone finished their chores and we all got to work.

We chatted while we forged. Without losing focus on my task, I asked Samya, "Once the rains stop, are the animals going to come out and roam? Like the wolves and such?"

"Yeah, most likely." She was in the middle of adjusting the knife's profile with

a rasp, but she paused briefly to respond. “We’ve been cooped up for a week now. Food supply is one thing, but besides that, it’ll be good to get out and move.”

“I see. So, today would be the best time to go out?”

“Something on your mind?”

I nodded. “It might be too late, but I want to find the men who were supposed to escort Anne home.”

“Ah...”

Our attackers had likely guessed that Anne would be returning that day. There would’ve been nothing more suspicious than us stumbling upon a bunch of dead bodies while the ambushers had been lurking in wait. They likely would’ve hidden the corpses of the escorts, just in case.

Our safety had been the priority at the time. After all, we’d wanted to avoid any reinforcements that might have come along while we lingered (or searched for bodies). Since then, we’d been cautious and hadn’t gone out.

Several days had passed, but I figured it shouldn’t be too late. At the very least, it was better than doing nothing at all.

“The rain has lightened up. Let’s go after lunch,” I declared, “before animals have a chance to get to them.”

Everyone nodded, and I turned to Anne. “Sorry, but will you come with us? We’ll need you there to confirm the identities, though it might be putting you at risk.”

It had been a few days, but there was no guarantee that whoever had attacked Anne had given up. There was a significant chance of running into reinforcements, or rather, a rescue squad.

Anne averted her gaze. Quietly, she said, “The enemies will know to prepare.” An expression she hadn’t shown us before flitted across her face. It looked to me as if the situation had whisked her back into her role as a princess of the empire.

“In any case...” She met my gaze. She had returned to being the Anne we

were familiar with. “Thank you.” She curtsied deeply.

I saw standing before me not Annemarie Christine Weisner, the seventh princess of the empire who had suffered the loss of her subjects, but simply a woman named Anne who had lost people she’d known.

After that, we finished our lunch with hardly any words exchanged among us and started our preparations.

I found myself sighing unwittingly, but I’d already made the decision. There was no choice but to see it through. So I steeled my resolve, wrapping my outer cloak around me.

I hesitated over whether to bring Krul and Lucy. I didn’t think it was a situation we could take children into, even if they weren’t human. Besides, they’d already gone out with me to the lake earlier. However, in the end, I decided to bring them along. If something unexpected happened, we’d have them run home with Anne, and the rest of us would deal with the trouble.

Krul was happy to go out a second time. “*Kululululu*,” she cooed, rubbing her neck on me. Lucy was running excitedly about underfoot too. I petted Krul on the neck and rubbed Lucy’s head.

Everyone had finished their preparations and we set off together.

The branches stretching from the tree trunks and the luscious leaves blocked nearly all of the drizzle from falling on our heads. Once in a while, Krul shook her head to cast off the drops on her hide. Lucy also shook off the water with vigor, eliciting shrieks of delight or possibly distress—it was difficult to tell which—from Diana and Anne.

“Come to think of it, does the forest ever see any fog?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Samya answered. “It gets misty here, sometimes to the point where you can’t see your own hand in front of you.”

No fog would form while it was still raining, but I had asked because it often grew hazy after the rain stopped. Samya confirmed my suspicions.

“When that happens, do the animals go back to their dens?”

“Me and other beastfolk do because the low visibility makes it impossible for us to hunt, but I’ll still hear animals howling and bleating,” Samya said. “From the smell, there are probably wolves and deer roaming around, but it’s kinda hard to tell.”

“They’re free to move around to some extent thanks to their sharp noses, huh?”

“Apparently so.”

Beastfolk like Samya had far better senses than humans, but their perception wasn’t at the level of wild animals in the forest. They relied on their vision in more cases, so when it was foggy out, it was tough for them to operate.

“That’s trouble,” I said. “We have to travel to the city tomorrow or the day after.”

“They’ll be wandering around, but they won’t attack us out of nowhere. Fog isn’t the ideal condition for them either.”

“I see.”

Aside from my cheat skills, I was fundamentally a normal human with normal human limits. With my vision gone, stolen away by fog, I would be hard-pressed to defend against any enemies. I’d be a sitting duck if a pack of wolves jumped us. It was more advantageous to attack when both your vision and sense of smell were operational. That logic held true for the animals in the forest too. In this case their intelligence was a boon.

“What you’re saying is, we can relax and take our time traveling through the forest,” I said.

“Yeeeup. It’s easy to lose sight of the road though, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

I shrugged as I replied, “You’re right about that.” We knew the Black Forest like the backs of our hands, but even so, if it was transformed by fog, there was a good chance we’d quickly get lost.

To avoid that scenario, we might have to consider postponing our trip if the fog’s too dense.

We neared the forest entrance. The trees grew sparser, which meant that the raindrops filtering through the canopy increased in proportion, as did the number of times Lucy shook herself off.

“We should be getting close,” I said. It felt like it’d been ages since the incident, but not even a week had passed. “Shall we split into small groups to search?”

Samya responded with a sickened expression, “No. It stinks.”

The rain should have washed away the reek of blood. Which meant...

“Got it. We’ll follow you,” I said without asking about the source of the smell.

Diana and Rike looked like they didn’t understand the situation, whereas Helen had realized straight away what was going on, her face twisting into a slight grimace. Anne had also grasped the implication—the fact that she had left me feeling cold.

We soon found the source of the stench. Our attackers had covered up their crime, but they’d been sloppy. They wouldn’t have had time to do a proper job, fearing that we could pass through at any moment. Nevertheless, their effort had been thorough enough that, had we walked by this area, it would’ve been unlikely for us to stop, even if we’d gotten a whiff of something.

I had Diana, Rike, Lidy, and the two little ones wait—the rest of us closed in on the scene.

Should we be happy that the victims haven’t been buried? There were three mounds covered with leafy branches. At a glance, they wouldn’t have looked like anything other than normal brushwood.

Samya and I carefully removed the camouflage, revealing the bodies of the three victims. They didn’t look very well-to-do, even after accounting for the water damage from the prolonged exposure to rain, but their outfits were likely disguises. The quality of their clothes was good enough.

I turned to Anne. “I know it must be painful, but do you recognize them?”

Biting on her lower lip, she mumbled, “Yes...”

I placed my palms together in a prayer for the deceased and closed my eyes

softly. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have to bury them here. We’ll dig their graves as deep as we can, so animals won’t dig them out. Can you please remove anything that might give away their identities?”

“I understand,” responded Anne.

Helen stood guard while Anne, with hesitant movements, stripped the bodies of identifying markers like pendants or knives. Both Anne and these victims would’ve come prepared for the worst, but that didn’t mean that she was immune to shock when tragedy did strike. Her hand was shaking minutely.

I wanted to say something, *anything*, to help her, but I couldn’t find the words. I could only watch over her silently.

After a while, Anne moved away from the corpses.

“You’re finished?” I asked.

She responded with a tiny nod. I didn’t bother asking if she was okay. It was obvious that she wasn’t.

After this, we would dig the graves, but there was no need for Anne to participate. I left her in Diana’s care while Samya, Helen, and I got down to work.

It took us a considerable amount of time to shovel out the holes, which might not need saying considering the graves were for three grown adults. However, more than the physical toll, it was the mental burden of the deaths that slowed our movements. If Helen, who was comparatively more used to this kind of situation, hadn’t been with us, it might have taken well past evening and deep into the night to finish.

We’d brought torches with us just in case, but it certainly would’ve been difficult to continue working had it gotten even darker. Thankfully, we finished while there was still some light in the sky.

I called Anne back. It must’ve been agonizing for her, but I wanted to give her the chance to say goodbye. This was the last time she would see them.

“Come and help us lower them down. I’ve got this side. Anne, can you take the opposite side?” I requested.

Anne and I supported the body near the head while Samya and Helen grabbed the feet. We picked up the body and gently laid it in the grave. As I carried out the task, I was thinking that it was my responsibility to help shoulder some of the burden. After all, I wasn't a simple bystander in this incident.

We arranged the three victims at the bottom of the grave. Anne squeezed each of their hands tightly in turn, saying farewell in her own way. She reluctantly peeled away from the bodies, her movements as slow as the rain seeping into the ground. We stood by and watched.

Once Anne was done with her goodbyes, it was time to bury the bodies. I gave Anne one of the shovels. Her face downturned, she layered dirt over the victims with care. As they disappeared from view, her movements grew more and more sluggish, but Helen and I made up for it. We didn't stop until the corpses were completely covered.

I entrusted Anne to Diana a second time, while Samya, Helen, and I filled the graves the rest of the way. Then, I made three grave markers from branches I found nearby, planted them on mounds of dirt, and called everyone over.

I placed my palms together and bowed my head. "May you find peace on the other side," I murmured. Feeling too drained to pay attention, I didn't know whether the others had done the same.

Beneath the rain, we spent what could've been minutes and what could've been hours. Everyone was soaked to the point where it was impossible to tell whether one was crying or not. That may have been preferable for Anne anyway.

And, as for me?

I was seized by a nameless emotion that could've been anger or grief or something else entirely. There was no way to counterattack directly, but I would do whatever I could to right this wrong. This might've only been trouble we'd unwittingly gotten wrapped up in, but me and my family's way of living had been threatened.

We buried our attackers in a shallow grave as well. It was said that all was made holy after death. We didn't find anything that would divulge their identities when we checked, so we weren't forced to become grave robbers.

None of us said much on the way home. Krul and Lucy, both of whom should've been excited at the outing, rain or no rain, plodded next to us without their usual running around. Perhaps they had sensed the dark moods we were all in.

Back in the cabin, I prepared hot water for everyone. Anne soon came up to me. "Thank you, Eizo."

"I wouldn't have felt right without seeing them off properly," I replied. It wasn't for her sake so much as for my own sense of justice. However, because I was far from a saint, I left off without saying she didn't need to feel indebted.

We all took boiled water back to our own rooms, Anne included (though for her, it was the guest room), and wiped ourselves down. The hot water felt like heaven as it warmed my rain-chilled body.

It was fairly late by the time we finished cleaning ourselves off. I started cooking dinner right away. The women gathered in the living room to chat—though the day would come when we'd need to part ways, it was good for them to get along in the meantime.

Dinner was nothing but our usual fare, except I brought out alcohol. I prepared cups for all of us and three extras. When Anne noticed, she bowed her head in gratitude. I waved her off.

The next morning, when I went outside to go to the lake, I found that the rain had stopped completely. For the first time in a while, blue sky peeked out from behind the trees, backgrounding the canopy of leaves.

"It feels like a typhoon has just passed," I remarked. I didn't know whether typhoons happened in this world, but at the very least, there were probably large storms. *We should prepare for that eventuality.*

But first, we had to deal with the metaphorical storm headed our way. Today, we would take the first step toward doing so.

Krul and Lucy had come out to meet me, and together we went to refill our water supplies.

After the morning chores, we prepared to travel into the city, loading the cart as usual with all the normal inventory. However, today, only Rike, Diana, Helen,

and I would be making the trip, along with Krul and Lucy.

Samya and Lidy would be staying behind to hold down the fort. Samya was intimately familiar with the Black Forest and was a skilled fighter. Lidy was still new to this particular forest, but she had knowledge about forests in general and could wield magic.

It was a tough blow not having Samya with us, since she could root out enemies with her sharp sense of smell and instincts, but Helen and I would just have to work harder to make up for it. Needless to say, we were leaving Anne at the cabin too, which meant that we'd be operating with less intelligence about the situation, but that couldn't be helped.

"All right, good luck here," I told the three of them. "Worse comes to worst, run—even if you have to set the cabin on fire."

"Got it," replied Samya, disgruntled.

The "worst" included the possibility that Anne was a traitor in disguise. *Does Samya realize that?* I ruffled her hair and then climbed into the back of the cart, which was already hitched to Krul.

Krul drew the cart through the forest, heading for the road to the city. The weather had done a complete turnaround. Unlike the last few days, sunlight spilled through the canopy here and there.

The occasional rustles in the underbrush were likely from small forest critters tired of the rains. We didn't slack on our watch during the journey, but the most we saw were a few deer in the distance. In the near future, wolves would come out to roam and fill their empty stomachs. The forest would return to the way it always was.

The way it always was... That's the exact opposite of the situation we're in. I failed to suppress a bitter laugh.

"What is it?" asked Diana.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. Just marveling over how the forest is slowly returning to normal around us while we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. It feels like the world is moving on without us somehow."

Strictly speaking, the ground was even now still muddy from the rain, but otherwise, normal was well within reach.

“It can’t be helped, right? It’s not as if you’re to blame,” Diana replied.

“You’re not wrong, but...”

It was true that I wasn’t the direct cause of our current predicament. Anyone could claim that one of the triggers had been the weapons we’d made, which had been smuggled into the empire, thus leading to Helen’s capture. However, nothing would’ve happened had the empire’s men not bungled their job in the first place. From that perspective, it felt as if the empire was now just profiting off its own mistake.

That being said, it was undeniable that our weapons had been the seeds, and *that* was what still bothered me.

But, I had no choice except to swallow my unease. What had happened...had happened. There hadn’t been any way we could’ve prevented it either. Our only option would’ve been to jealously guard our weapons, never letting them off the premises, like some sort of national treasure. That just wasn’t realistic. And besides, they were already in circulation.

I shared my thoughts briefly with Diana and then returned my focus to the road.

The mud posed even more of an obstacle than I’d imagined it would, sucking at Krul’s feet and the wheels of the cart, so it took a little longer than usual for us to traverse the forest.

Most likely, the mastermind behind the scheme would’ve already been informed that the plan had gone awry. We were a large group and would stick out like a sore thumb to anyone spying on the road, especially since our cart was pulled by a drake and not a horse.

From the driver’s seat, Rike turned to look at us and asked, “What should we do?”

We had four options.

One, travel at our usual speed. Two, drop our speed and stay cautious. Three,

do the opposite—speed up and blow right on through. Four, stop here and send a scout ahead.

There were pros and cons to each. Personally, I didn't want to call any more attention to us than we already would be by just emerging from the Black Forest.

"Let's proceed at our usual pace," I directed. "Diana and Helen, I'm counting on you to keep a lookout."

"Understood," Diana replied.

"Of course," said Helen.

Rike nodded and flicked the reins. Krul did as Rike commanded and proceeded forward without altering her behavior. Diana, Helen, and I scanned our surroundings. Lucy poked her head off the edge of the cart, her snout twitching in the air; she was probably trying to help out.

Despite our caution, nothing awaited us outside the forest besides the usual flat plains bathed in sunlight.

When we turned onto the road into the city, a wave of relief washed over us. However, it was dangerous to let down our guard since our enemies could be waiting for just such a moment to strike. We shored up our resolve and proceeded down the road at our normal speed.

It was difficult to relax on the road for fear that we could be ambushed from the plains at any moment, but soon enough, the outer walls of the city became visible in the distance. Once again, it was tempting to slack off, but there was no true respite for us until we arrived at the city entrance.

"Helen," I said.

She leaned forward toward me. I didn't think we were in danger of being overheard, but there was absolutely no reason for us to announce our honest situation to the world.

"Anything from the rear?" I asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

"That was quick."

“This is my forte. I know what signs to look for.”

“I see.”

We could trust the judgment of a professional mercenary like Helen.

I tightened my guard and returned to scouring the area around us. We only had to persevere until city guards came into sight.

As we drew near the entrance, we saw a familiar face. We’d met the guard on duty several times before, but since we usually passed through quickly, I didn’t know his name. Marius or Camilo would likely be able to tell me if I were to describe him, but there was no reason for me to ask.

We slowed down as we approached. Peering down from the cart, I called out, “Hey there!”

Diana and Helen kept their eyes on the surroundings.

“Oh, it’s you guys,” the guard replied. “I’ve been wondering what’s been keeping you away. Haven’t seen you around lately.”

“The rains,” I answered simply.

“Now that you mention it, they did last quite a while this time.”

“Yeah.”

After a bit of small talk, we continued through the gate. If there’d been nefarious rumors floating around—like, for example, a felon who’d committed a major crime was hiding out in the area—the inspection might not have gone so smoothly. However, on an average day, the inspections were usually cursory.

The city was boisterous as always. Today, the crowd seemed denser, perhaps because it’d been raining up through yesterday. Lucy peeked out of the cart, swiveling to look all around us, and just like always, passersby treated her with smiles.

It was unlikely we’d be attacked in the city since the cost of failure was so high, but the chances of our enemy launching an all-or-nothing offensive weren’t zero either. I kept an eye on the streets while pretending to mind Lucy.

In the end, we made it to Camilo’s store without encountering signs of

anyone suspicious. No one tried to ambush us either. All our caution had amounted to nothing, but if we waited until something happened to start paying attention, it'd be too late.

We left the cart in the storehouse as usual and entrusted Krul and Lucy to the apprentice. Krul rubbed him with her neck, and Lucy ran circles around him. They'd both gotten attached to the boy.

"Come on now, Krul, Lucy, behave yourselves," I scolded.

But the apprentice only smiled and said, "No, that's all right."

The best time to kidnap Krul and Lucy would be while we were up in the conference room, but they would be safe in the apprentice's care.

And so, Diana, Helen, and I went up to the second floor to wait for Camilo.

"I'm beat," I muttered, collapsing into a chair and planting facedown on the table. We hadn't gotten a moment to catch our breath since leaving the cabin. These harrowing journeys were going to be our norm in the near future.

Diana looked at me and laughed. "I thought you lived and breathed peril, Eizo."

"*Circumstances* may have driven me from the north, but at the end of the day, I'm just an old blacksmith," I protested. "There's no way I'd be used to this."

Needless to say, in my previous world, I'd never had to visit a client knowing that my life was in danger. It wasn't completely out of the question for a normal person to have such an experience, but for better or worse, I'd never had anything to do with that life before.

"You know, for a group supposedly targeting *Anne*, their tactics are sloppy," Helen remarked, a hint of severity in her expression. I was sure she'd exhausted herself on the ride here too, but she didn't show it on her face.

There's the difference between a pro and an amateur.

I turned to look at Helen without lifting my head from the table. "So?"

"If they wanted Anne, they should've confronted us on the way here," she explained. "Normally, the assumption would be that we'd try to smuggle her

here with our luggage, right? So, they should've attacked us on the road."

"I see."

I'd felt iffy about sending Anne back to the empire while our foes could still be looking for her. I first wanted to learn more about the circumstances, and until that time, continue to shelter her. However, it certainly was possible to ignore the risks and sneak her across the border. In that case, our best chance—and perhaps our only chance—was today, when our enemies were shorthanded.

The fact that they hadn't seized the opportunity might be on purpose.

"It's important to stay cautious, but you'll burn yourself out if you don't rest at all," Helen said.

"You're right. I'll yield the watch to you on our ride home then," I joked.

She grinned. "Sure. Leave it to the pros."

That was when we heard a knock at the door. I sat back up. In my mind, I started organizing the questions I wanted to ask.

Camilo stepped into the room. "Hey." He raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong? You look dead tired."

"I am."

"That's rare."

It was true—these journeys had always been physically tiring but nothing more than that. They were usually half work and half play.

I smiled wryly. "I'll explain later. First, let's settle the details of the order."

"Got it."

We ran through our regular negotiations. As usual, Camilo agreed to purchase the weapons we'd steadily churned out. He signaled the head clerk with his eyes, and the man nodded. But, before the clerk could leave the room, I rushed to add, "Give us an extra portion of salt, please. We'll pay accordingly."

The clerk raised a brow but all he said was, "Very well," before leaving the room.

"Does this extra serving have to do with your explanation?" asked Camilo.

I shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much.”

I peered over to see Camilo’s reaction. He was practically on the edge of his seat with anticipation and wasn’t bothering to hide it. Between the two of us, there was no point in keeping secrets.

“We have a guest staying with us. We didn’t bring her today, but there’s no point in keeping it from you, since we won’t be able to make any progress ourselves.”

At that, I told Camilo about Anne—about the fact that she was the seventh princess of the empire—and described the attack we’d endured in detail. Camilo listened to me seriously without cracking any jokes. There was little surprise showing on his face, which meant he’d most likely known something about who Anne was and her position.

Once I finished speaking, Camilo leaned back heavily in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “I see...” He fidgeted with his beard, a bad habit of his which indicated that he had information and was debating whether or not to share.

We waited with bated breath for him to speak. Helen looked ready to launch herself at him any second, but I held her back.

Before long, Camilo sighed deeply and squared himself to face us. “First of all,” he began, “I was the one who told her where to go. She came here.”

Helen lunged forward. Diana and I pulled her back—she was putting up too much of a fight for me to manage alone.

Camilo then continued. “I had a general idea of what she was going to ask of you, but I figured you would turn her down. And I warned her that if she harmed any of you, the margrave would hear about it.”

“I should take that as a mark of your faith?” I asked with a twist of my lips.

“Of course,” he answered calmly.

Camilo didn’t believe that I would pack up my things and march off with a “See ya!” the moment someone tried to poach me—he wouldn’t have told her where our forge was located if he thought I might leave. If nothing else, that would cause Camilo trouble to some extent.

“As for what you’re likely the most curious about... Your attacker’s identities...”

Camilo paused. Silence fell in the room. I heard the *gulp* of someone swallowing thickly, and it might even have been me.

After a moment that felt like an eternity, Camilo continued. “I can’t say for sure at this time.”

Quote, end quote.

We looked at him with reproach.

He pursed his lips. “I literally just found out about the attack a second ago. What do you expect from me?”

Now that he mentioned it, he had a point. But we knew Camilo to be a clever merchant. He heard rumors and gathered information all the time, so I don’t think it was unusual to have expected it from him.

“That being said, I can’t let you go home dissatisfied and empty-handed. I have my reputation to uphold. I’ll look into it,” promised Camilo.

“Okay, thanks,” I replied.

“I have a hunch already, so it shouldn’t take long.”

“All right, then we’ll be back next week.”

“Oh, yeah? Sorry to make you go out of your way,” he apologized.

“No, it’s best to resolve this problem ASAP.”

After that, we returned to chatting about everyday matters while waiting for the head clerk to return. Apparently, Marius was working hard in the capital and had solidified his position as Count Eimoor. Diana reacted to the news with pleasure.

The path of a noble sure is rough.

After a time, the clerk returned, and we left the conference room. Camilo summoned the head clerk to him, which was rare after our meetings; perhaps Camilo didn’t want to waste any time getting started on the investigation. I would appreciate it if that were the case.

The door shut with a *thud*.

Helen muttered under her breath, "He was furious."

"Really?" I asked.

"His cherished friends were put into harm's way," she explained. "He was angry at the perpetrator...and himself."

I'd thought his demeanor was slightly more serious than usual, but to me, he seemed to be as even-tempered as always. Apparently, Helen, who'd known him for a long time, had sensed differently.

The closed door let through no sound. I turned to face it and bowed shallowly.

We went downstairs and around to the back. Lucy came bounding toward me, her tail going wild. I crouched down and intercepted her. The force of her leap was heavier than before, proof that she was growing.

One of these days, I would have to start dodging her. Although, I could easily picture myself (or Diana) trying to catch her as she bowled me over.

"Sorry to trouble you all the time," I said as I tipped the apprentice.

Fidgeting shyly, he replied, "It's nothing, really."

The boy looked to be about ten or possibly a little younger. I knew that he was going to grow into a fine young man someday. The head clerk may have even been waiting impatiently for the day the two of them could drink together.

"Come to think of it, does Camilo have a wife or children?" I asked.

"I haven't heard anything like that," the boy answered.

Helen confirmed it. "Me neither. Nothing about ex-wives either."

Surely, it was rare in this world for a man of Camilo's age and success to not have been married before, though I wasn't one to talk.

"That means, of the Three Rowdy Rascals, my brother will probably be the first to marry," remarked Diana.

"The three what-a-whats?" I asked.

“Rowdy Rascals. In other words: you, Camilo, and my brother,” she replied. “You’re always getting into trouble together, you know?”

“No...that’s...”

I suppose if I were to try and summarize our relationship in words, it was true—we three were basically brats that egged each other on, so I couldn’t protest further.

I petted Krul’s neck as I led her to the cart. She was in high spirits.

“You said Marius would get married early?” I asked. “Is that because of court politics?”

“Yeah. Especially if an offer of marriage were to come from the margrave’s family line,” Diana elaborated. “My brother wouldn’t be able to refuse.”

“Ah.”

The fastest and surest way for the margrave to secure the count’s alliance would be to marry off one of his relatives and absorb Marius into the family. Marius owed the margrave too, so turning down the proposal would be out of the question. Besides, it was possible there were more benefits than demerits to accepting such an offer.

Considering what Camilo had said about Marius successfully cementing his position as the count, it wouldn’t be strange if marriage talks had already begun. However, I hoped any possible wedding reception would be put off until after we resolved this mess with Anne.

Whether or not I’d be on the guest list, Diana was sure to be, and I shied away from the idea of sending her off to the capital alone in our current situation. Helen could go along as a bodyguard, but there was still a chance that something could happen to them.

I put aside my musings for a moment, and we loaded up the supplies into the cart as usual.

Now that I thought about it, it was no mere feat to be able to secure this amount of food and goods on a regular basis. I couldn’t be sure (since I’d never asked), but it was certainly possible that the shop had to field supply orders for

military expeditions once in a while. Would the margrave allow such a convenient resource to roam free? A successful merchant's help must be worth the hand of one young lady or another in his family.

And by "successful merchant," I was, of course, talking about Camilo.

Well, in any case, all that was for nobles to deal with. He'd probably decline if asked anyway.

I hitched Krul to the cart, and we all jumped in. "All right, let's go home," I declared.

Krul trilled, "*Kuluuuuuu*," and we pulled slowly away from Camilo's store.

Our journey home was leisurely, though we kept up our guard.

The weeping clouds from the week before had disappeared completely, and the sun bathed the city with light and the god's blessings. People mingled in the streets, any bitterness from being cooped up inside blown away by the good weather. I wanted to be able to enjoy this time with a worry-free heart, but there was no helping our situation.

The guard from the morning was still on duty; his time to rotate had yet to come. We said our goodbyes as we left the city.

On the road, we increased our speed. Krul was energetic as usual, with a pace rivaling a horse or slightly faster. Our cart was simply made, but it did have my custom suspension system installed, so it could be pushed to a higher speed than a normal horse-drawn cart.

The rest of the world would assume that we were fast because Krul, a drake, was pulling us. It was one form of camouflage. Come to think of it, Camilo had said that he'd be able to mass-produce such suspension systems in the near future. I wondered how that was coming along.

Next time, I'll ask.

Our drake-drawn cart rode across a canvas of blue, green, and brown. If our foes were going to attack today, this was their last chance. We proceeded with extra caution.

Along the way, Helen turned to me. “So, I’ve been curious for a while...”

“Yeah?” I replied.

“Why not enter the forest as soon as we leave town? You could just find an entrance that’s hard to spot from the city.”

“Aaah.”

In our current predicament, it was best to minimize time spent on the road—after all, we were easier targets out in the open. There were upsides to hiding ourselves among the trees as soon as possible, provided we didn’t pick a place that screamed, “Look! We’re heading into the forest now!” Even when we weren’t in danger, it made good sense to spend less time on the road where we stood out. I was hard-pressed to deny it.

But, well, you know...

“It would make the journey significantly longer,” I said.

The roads weren’t paved in asphalt like the ones in my previous world, but they were still maintained. By comparison, no human hands had ever intervened in the wilds of Black Forest (I could say this without even a touch of exaggeration). In the forest, we would have to fumble our way through foliage looking for routes where the cart could pass.

Ultimately, we could travel dramatically faster on the road—it all boiled down to the time difference. Even if we spent the afternoon on things other than work, it was still better to have a longer chunk of daylight left when we got back.

And this time, we had left people at home too. Another point in favor of staying on the road was that we could confirm they were safe faster. Every second mattered. That was why we were hurrying down the road. Besides, this was our routine, and anyone snooping around wouldn’t be able to tell that anything was out of the ordinary.

I explained my reasoning to Helen, leaving out the part about the asphalt.

“I see,” she responded.

“In truly desperate times, our best option may be to escape into the forest

quickly, but I don't think our current situation is that bleak." I paused for a moment, then added, "Or...is that naive of me?"

"No, it should be fine. I don't know what's holding our enemies up, but the fact that they're dragging their feet means that we still have some breathing room. If they were serious, they would've made their move back when we first came out of the forest this morning. Not that we should let down our guards."

Helen scanned the horizon without turning her head. Only her eyes were alert—or so it seemed, but actually, her senses were also perked for the presence of other people.

"Yeah, we have to take lookout duty seriously if we plan to return home safely," I said.

She nodded.

Just then, a rustle came from a patch of grass nearby, and the air on the cart grew tense.

Helen had her dual blades drawn in a heartbeat. Hopefully, it was just a wild animal, but if it wasn't...

Her expression turned quizzical for a brief second. Then, a shadow came flying out. The intruder was neither an adorable little bunny nor the scoundrels who were after us.

It was someone we knew.

"Catalina?" I asked.

"Heh heh, why hello there," Catalina greeted. She was one of the servants under the employ of the Eimoors.

I directed Rike to stop the cart, and she complied. The grass rustled as Catalina climbed out. She dusted herself off and picked away the leaves stuck to her.

Of course, she wasn't dressed the way she had been when we'd met her at the Eimoor estate—her attire was closer to what she'd worn when escorting Helen and me during our flight from the empire. At a glance, it was a run-of-the-mill traveler's outfit. However, other than the shortsword she used for self-

protection, which was bared for anyone to see, she usually had several other weapons stashed on her person.

“Do you have business with us?” I asked from atop our horse...drake-drawn cart.

“I’ll tell you on the way,” she said, jumping in without so much as a “by-your-leave.”

Lucy welcomed her with a wagging tail. “Arf!” The pup leaped up into Catalina’s arms.

“Lucy, my darling!” Catalina cooed, hugging Lucy tight.

Diana was watching from the sidelines, and a tinge of frustration came over her face. To be safe, I tried to distance myself from her, but her hand shot out to grip my arm.

With a flick of the reins, Rike got us moving again.

“So?” I pressed. “What did you come to say?”

Ruffling Lucy’s soft fur, Catalina answered, “I’m sure you already know to some extent, but I’m here to talk about your *guest*, Master Eizo.” Her expression was soft, but her tone was serious.

Diana squeezed my arm. Her grip was starting to hurt, but I kept that to myself.

“I will do you the favor of not asking how you came by the news,” I said.

She smiled. “Yes, that would be preferable.”

The info must’ve been leaked from the margrave—this seemed like the kind of situation he’d love to meddle in. Instead, I was more curious about Catalina. Had she always done this kind of work? Missions cloaked in shadows and secrecy?

“As for the main topic, at least one of the kingdom’s nobility is involved in this affair, though we have yet to grasp the full details.”

So it hadn’t been the rash scheme of a mystery person from the empire. The whispers had likely reached the margrave’s ears precisely because the situation

involved someone here in the kingdom.

“Your decision not to bring your guest along today was correct. Soon, *they* will get tired of waiting, although there is someone keeping them contained. We’ll be able to pounce if they make a move, but they might take a gamble to worm their way out. They might think that, as long as they achieve their goal, they’ll be able to figure something out down the road.”

The one pumping the brakes must be either the margrave or Marius. I didn’t want them crossing any dangerous bridges, but they were acting to prevent us from falling into harm. In my heart, I bowed my head in gratitude.

“And the message you came to deliver is...?”

“Right. It will take some time to clean everything up. In the meantime, we hope you will continue to shelter your guest. I know it is a burden on your household, Master Eizo.” Catalina looked genuinely apologetic.

“There is no need to feel sorry,” I replied casually. “We were prepared for such an eventuality.”

And, to tell the truth, it wasn’t any trouble to us at all. If anything, I was more worried about Anne and what consequences her long absence from the empire might have.

As we were talking, we crossed the distance to the forest entrance. I had assumed Catalina would come back to the forge with us, but instead, she said, “This is where I leave you. Please give everyone my regards, as well as my sympathies to Her Highness. See you, Lucy, and you too, Miss Krul.”

“Arf arf!!!”

“Kululululululu.”

Right on the tail of her farewell, Catalina disembarked in one graceful leap, as if she weren’t jumping off a cart barreling down the road. We had slowed since we would soon be entering the forest, but we were still moving fast enough that her stunt was dangerous. If I had tried the same move, I definitely would’ve sprained an ankle.

Catalina waved her arm. “Thank you!”

Ah, I see. She's pretending she just hitched a ride with us.

I waved back to keep up the pretense.

In the forest, we had less to worry about. I breathed out a sigh of relief and started to think through Catalina's explanation.

With Rike at the reins, we continued into the tree cover.

I couldn't help but laugh at how relieved I felt. I hadn't even been in this world a full year, but it had become like my own backyard. For most others, unease would've replaced relief, but home was where the heart was, and my heart was here. I didn't feel a single trace of fear.

And now that we were back in the forest, I knew we didn't have to stay as cautious as we did on the road and in the city. Like Samya had said, the wolves—the guardians of the wild—would be starving after the rainy season and roaming free. Obviously, their presence would make it difficult for anyone to hide away.

However, if we relaxed too much, we ran the risk of falling prey to pupnappers and bears, so we kept up a minimal surveillance. It felt like my senses were sharper in the forest. Maybe that was because of the dense concentration of magic in the air. *I'll ask Lidy next time.*

In the end, we made it back to the cabin without having any incidents on the road.

"We're home!" I called as we approached.

Samya was waiting outside for us—she must've known we were coming. Either she had heard something, smelled something, or maybe she'd just sensed our presence. I'd thought she might have gone out hunting for sport, but apparently she'd stayed home.

"Welcome back," she said. "Did anything happen?"

"No, nothing. It was perfectly uneventful," I replied.

Samya, Lidy, and Anne looked relieved. Had they not been in the mood to hunt because they'd been worried about us? The thought made me feel half bashful and half pleased.

Rike drew Krul to a stop. Lucy hopped out of the cart and plopped down in front of Samya and the others as if saying, “I’m home!” Lidy crouched down and stroked her head with a quiet, “Welcome home.”

Next, as usual, we had to unhitch Krul from the cart and bring the goods into the cabin and the storehouses. Anne pitched in too.

“Sorry to make you help,” I told her.

“No, I like having the chance to move my body. Besides, I am the one imposing on you.”

As her physique suggested, Anne was strong. In a way, it was novel to meet someone who was no stronger or weaker than they looked. Besides Rike, everyone in the family was far tougher than one would guess. I wasn’t going to be saying any of that out loud though, since I knew very well that no young woman would take it as a compliment.

We finished slightly faster than usual, so we had extra time for ourselves.

Rike and I chose to spend the afternoon in the workshop.

“Let’s get down to business,” I declared, lighting the firebed and preparing the equipment.

I picked up a metal plate then heated it in the firebed. Once hot, I hammered it into a thin sheet and cut it into pieces, eyeballing the sizes.

“Boss, what are you doing?” Rike asked, putting a pause on her own practice and coming over to peek at my work.

“I think it’s about time I tried making a gauntlet,” I explained.

“You can make armor too? Wow!”

I nodded. Because of my unique skill set, I could forge more items in a given amount of time compared to the average blacksmith. My efficiency applied to armor too. I hadn’t forged armor thus far, but now that Helen had joined the family (and with this whole incident concerning Anne), I had started to think about ways to protect what we had.

However...

“Today is just the practice run,” I said.

“Do you even need to practice, Boss?”

I smiled dryly. “Of course.”

Though I may have been granted cheat abilities, I had been a complete blacksmithing novice to begin with. In order to make extraordinarily complex pieces like armor, I wanted to have a grasp of the general construction before I started.

First, I had to test out the articulation of the joints. I shaped the metal pieces with precise strikes of my hammer. I wasn’t using my regular hammer but one with a smaller head. It had come equipped with the forge, though I hadn’t been blessed with the opportunity to use it until now.

I bent one of the thin plates into a U-shape and then repeated the same process for two more pieces of varying lengths. One was on the long side, one was medium length, and one was short.

For each piece, I punched small holes near one end of the plate on opposite sides of one another using a rivet. I didn’t bother with deburring, since it wasn’t going to be an actual product. At the other end of the plate, I made small pointed protrusions on both sides.

I did the same for the other two plates and then assembled the finger by inserting the protrusions in one plate into the rivet holes of the next plate to form the joints.

“Mmmm,” I groaned.

“What’s wrong? Is it not going well?” Rike asked.

“No, it’s not that...”

I wasn’t worried about the project itself; everything was going smoothly. Looking at my work, I didn’t see any problems with it so far.

However...

“I was always able to wield my hammer with some kind of *oomph*, you know? This just doesn’t tick all the same boxes.”

“Aaah. Well, you’ve been using the same hammer all this time after all,” Rike remarked. “Even for detailing.”

That was the problem—I’d added engravings and embellishments to my works in the past, but always with the hammer I was used to.

“Good thing I’m not farsighted yet,” I mumbled.

“You’re not what yet?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

Had I been in my previous world, I would’ve definitely had to worry about my vision while pursuing this line of work. Thank goodness I had the Watchdog make me younger again, even if only back to my thirties.

I joined the three pieces and bent the joints experimentally—the metal clanked, and the pieces moved pretty smoothly. This was one finger of the gauntlet...or something close enough anyway.

I hadn’t tapered the end of the finger nor made it to fit anyone’s hand in particular, so it was big. Too big. It wouldn’t be the least bit useful even for Anne with her large stature.

All right, that was an exaggeration. It could still be of *some* use.

“Ngh—” I grunted, slashing my knife down on the armor.

My blade normally sliced right through anything I tried to cut, but it couldn’t pierce this metal.

Neither the prototype nor my knife was scratched. It looked as if I had simply placed my knife down on the surface of the finger. If the armor could stop my knife, it’d be able to withstand attacks from most other weapons without sustaining any damage. Now, the mithril blade from Lidy’s village was another story...

In other words, this armor provided ample defense for the little bit of space it covered. I couldn’t imagine a situation where my prototype would come in handy though.

Rike’s eyes sparkled the way Lucy’s did when the pup spotted meat. She then sighed and offered a compliment: “Even the armor you make is amazing.”

“No, I’m not sure about that,” I demurred. In this world, only I knew the truth behind my skills.

Rike apparently assumed I was just being humble and shifted her attention back to the prototype. “With this quality, the finished gauntlet is going to be astonishing.”

“You think?”

“Yes. You have my word, whatever it’s worth.”

“That’s good to hear. I trust in your seal of approval.”

We exchanged smiles. *If I can pass on armor-forging techniques to Rike, the future of Moritz Forge, her family forge, will be secure.*

That night over dinner, I summarized for Anne what we’d learned from Camilo and Catalina. For the time being, we would leave whatever was happening in the kingdom to them. I also made sure to inform her of the plans for the future.

“You’ll be staying with us for a while longer while the situation is still unclear.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” she responded.

“It’s no bother.”

Fortunately, we had enough to eat at the forge. It was questionable whether our methods were good enough to support us for the rest of our lives, but our stock would last in the meantime. The cost of feeding one extra mouth was no concern.

Samya announced that she would be going out hunting tomorrow. Of course, Diana and Helen said they would accompany her, and so did Lidy. Surprisingly, she was the active type, our Lidy.

I asked them to take Anne along too. We ran the risk of exposing information about the Black Forest’s topography to the empire, but was a single princess really capable of remembering all the twists and turns of the forest?

Regardless of the predicament we were still in, we all enjoyed dinner together and turned in early.

Chapter 4: A Slightly Different Kind of Morning

It was now the second day after the rains had stopped, and the humidity in the air had mostly dissipated as well.

Today, as always, Krul, Lucy, and I headed together to the lake.

“How much has the water level risen, I wonder,” I murmured.

Since we were in the forest, there must’ve been enough surface and groundwater to nourish the trees, but the low humidity said otherwise. Could it be that the trees lived off magical energy?

“It certainly sounds possible,” I mumbled, looking over at Krul and Lucy. Krul was a drake, a subspecies of the powerful dragon. She was as large as a horse, and she relied half on magic to maintain her size and mass.

Lucy looked to be a normal wolf pup on the outside, but she, too, was a magical beast through and through. Lidy said that she was going to keep growing from here on out and could even end up nearly as big as Krul. Lucy drew vitality and energy from magic as well.

From that perspective, there was a decent chance that the trees owed magic for their thick, magnificent trunks. Whether trees transformed by magic would end up as “treants” (to borrow a term I knew from Earth) was a question to which I had no answer.

When we arrived at the lakeshore, I unconsciously exclaimed “Whoa...” in admiration of the scenery’s beauty.

Mist drifted across the surface of the lake. Between the fog and dawn light, the scene looked like it was straight from a fairy tale. The sun sparkled off the water and dyed the mist in shades of red and orange. The trees with their black trunks rose in the foreground. Beautiful. If I’d had my camera from my previous world—it had been a decent model—I wouldn’t have hesitated to press the shutter button.

Having been kept busy with one incident after another, this was my first time

seeing such scenery since coming to this world. It was a welcome surprise.

I dipped a water jug into the lake. “*Yowch!*” I tensed up and yelped when my hand touched the water—it was freezing, more so than usual.

Nevertheless, one by one, I filled the jugs Krul and I had carried. The water chilled my body. Meanwhile, Krul and Lucy were splashing and frolicking in the lake a distance away, paying no attention to the temperature of the water.

Once I was done, I took a dip to wash myself off. Then, I wiped down Krul and Lucy. When Lucy climbed out of the water, she shook her body furiously, showering me and Krul with water drops.

Same old, same old.

I’d repeatedly told her to quit it, and I suspected she understood but was doing it anyway. It wasn’t as if it hurt, so I didn’t plan to scold her.

Back at the cabin, it was another normal morning at Forge Eizo. Well, Anne was still with us, so it wasn’t *perfectly* normal. Anne was apparently not an early bird, but she had gotten up by the time I returned.

I prepared breakfast. Right before we were about to eat, Lucy padded over to Anne and pawed at her leg.

“Wha—? Huh?” Anne said, baffled by Lucy’s sudden approach.

Observing from the sidelines, Diana looked like she was going to melt, her eyes going soft and dreamy. “Oh my, you want Big Sis Anne to feed you, don’t you?”

“What? Really?” Anne looked at me, still confused.

I nodded and handed her the plate of meat I’d prepared. Lucy barked brightly.

With a determined expression, Anne took the plate and placed it down next to Lucy.

“*Ruff!*” Lucy barked again, rubbing against Anne with her whole body. Then, she began to scarf down her breakfast.

I’m sure I don’t need to explain how Diana reacted to the sight. The only thing I’d like to add is that my shoulder’s HP was being drained starting bright and

early today.

After breakfast, Samya and the others prepared for their hunt. I thought they would have Anne act as the beater, but Samya lent Anne her old bow instead. It wasn't as powerful as the ones I'd made for the family, but it had served Samya well for a long time. Anne should have no difficulty with it.

Rike and I saw them off at the door. "Good luck on the hunt," I told them as they left.

"Be back soon," Samya said.

Krul and Lucy had eagerly waited their turns to say goodbye to the hunters, adding their voices to our exchange. Then, the group set off.

Rike and I proceeded to the workshop. I lit the fires. There was still more to do with the gauntlet, but right now we had to focus on the delivery goods for next week. Or could it already be for this week?

"Shall we get started?" I asked.

"Yes."

Tomorrow, hunting was off the table (butchering any prey was a separate matter) as per the conventions of the forest, so the others would be able to help cast swords. Therefore, it was best to spend today on weapons that needed to be forged, like knives.

"There's plenty of demand for both swords and knives, but it might be time to formally add spears to our list of products," I remarked.

"Huh? Haven't we made them before?"

"For a time, but those were for a bulk order per Camilo's request."

They had probably ended up in the empire, passed on by the margrave. As remuneration, the margrave had received parcels of abandoned land from the empire. I was too afraid to hear the details though, so I hadn't confirmed my suspicions.

However, were that the case, then the empire currently possessed more of the spears I'd made than the kingdom. It was possible to mass-produce more spears to circulate throughout the kingdom, but to be honest, that wouldn't be

any fun.

“From swords to spears, huh? What if you decrease the amount of elite models you make and fill that gap with spears?” Rike suggested with a hand on her chin and a pensive expression.

If Rike said so, then it would be fine. Unlike me with my cheats, Rike was a person (or dwarf, in this case) who could forge weapons properly.

However, just to be sure, I asked her to elaborate. “You think?”

She put her hand down and nodded. “Yes. Demand is steady, and Camilo is a capable merchant. That much is true. Business should be smooth sailing for the time being. However—and this is an extreme example—if every single person in the world bought one of your knives, then we would no longer have any avenue for sales.”

“Naturally.”

“That’s taking it a bit far, but it’s easy to imagine that demand will falter one day,” she continued. “At that point, it would be good to have another product waiting in the wings to seamlessly transition to the center stage. In the meantime, it’s best to focus on expanding the range of quality.”

“Hmm.”

The first step is to have Camilo sell a limited quantity of spears to test the waters. Once the demand for swords and knives declined, that was the time to drastically increase spear production.

It was a sensible way to expand the blacksmithing business, but it seemed that the day I could kick back and relax with my family was still a ways off. We had to be sure we’d be able to feed ourselves until then. The thought of suddenly losing all our income when that goal was right before my eyes seemed terrifying.

“The only worry then is whether Camilo will—”

Rike shot down my concern. “Considering the superb quality of your work, there isn’t a single merchant who wouldn’t want to sell them.” I was taken aback by the fervor in her voice.

“I-I’m sure you’re right... I trust you,” I said, recovering my cool before I could embarrass myself. “Let’s make some knives, shall we?”

I picked up a plate of metal and stuck it in the firebed, beginning the usual forging process: watch for the right temperature, hammer the metal into shape, polish it off.

However, now that I had decided to embark on a new path, my hammer felt lighter, as if it were a dancer leaping on top of a metal stage.

Thud!

Anne collapsed on the floor. The whole family circled her, staring down at her prone form. Neither Samya, nor Diana, nor Lidy, nor Helen, nor even Rike tried to help her up.

Anne panted for breath at first, but her breathing soon evened out. She took a giant inhale and then—

“I’m exhausted!!!” she hollered.

Silly me! Thinking she was just taking a sip of air...

We didn’t have neighbors out here, but had we lived in an apartment, I could one-hundred-percent guarantee that the person next door would be banging at our walls in complaint.

“That’s only natural,” I said to her with a wry smile.

I’d never tagged along on hunting trips before, but even Diana had come back worn out after her first few, and she had far more stamina than the typical sheltered lady.

Wild animals—the ones from my previous world included—could run at unbelievable speeds. Pursuing them on foot was demanding work.

“But you showed some good moves out there,” Samya complimented Anne.

Anne propped herself up. “I’ve been hunting a few times before, though never in a forest.”

I see. She might not be able to compare to Diana, but deep down, she’s a tomboy too. Otherwise, I suppose she wouldn’t have wanted a greatsword.

“More importantly,” Anne said, “that was one humongous boar!”

“Today’s catch was especially huge,” Samya agreed. “They’re usually smaller.”

“It was the first time in my life I’ve ever seen a boar that size,” Lidy added.

And so, the three of them clamored over the day’s success. At least now I knew what the catch of the day was. Anne was particularly worked up. Having caught her breath, she was now babbling enthusiastically. *Hunting in the forest might actually suit her.*

At the moment, she was standing on tiptoe, throwing her arms wide and saying, “Thiiis tall, and thiiis wide,” to really drive home the point of how enormous the boar had been. She was chattering away with the pure passion of a child—it was almost like her brain had regressed in inverse proportion to her stature.

“Was it really that huge?” I asked.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do it without Krul,” Diana answered. “Luckily, she *did* come along, and we were a large group, so it was mostly safe to take the boar on. That’s what Samya said.”

“Oh, really?”

Diana and I both glanced at Samya. She noticed us and shrugged. “Lucy was actually the one who found it.”

“She did?”

“*Ruff!!!*” Lucy barked in response, her tail batting left and right.

I patted her head. She was growing up to be a wonderful hunting hound—nay, a hunting *wolf*. Soon, she’d be able to take down critters (like rabbits) all by herself. At that point, it would be up to her whether she wanted to stay by our side.

We weren’t going to bring the boar back until tomorrow, so I prepared our usual fare for dinner. As we ate, Anne kept nodding off, her head bobbing and her body swaying like a ship at sea. A deep, sound sleep was surely waiting for her tonight.

She’ll wake up on time tomorrow, right?

Contrary to my fears, the next morning, Anne got up with no problems. Between the previous day's exertion, lingering muscle pains, and how exhausted she'd been last night, I'd thought she might have trouble waking. However, her eyes were bright and clear, and her movements were sharp.

The discrepancy niggled at my mind as I set the table, but Anne soon cleared up the mystery.

With the biggest grin I'd ever seen on her face, she declared, "I can't wait to take back our catch!"

Now I get it. I smiled.

After a peaceful breakfast, we got ready to head out.

The forest was our home territory. We were only trekking to the lake to fetch yesterday's boar, but it was impossible to predict what could happen. Just in case, we each brought a weapon.

Even if there weren't any more assassins roaming around, there could be bears in the area—they were honestly the bigger threat. If we had the bad luck to stumble across one, the only chance we had of defeating it without injury was to kill it quickly. *The best defense is a good offense!*

I gave Anne one of the (entry-level) knives we'd forged yesterday. A spear was still short enough to use in the forest to some extent, but swinging around a greatsword in the crowded confines would court disaster. Even so, Anne appeared dissatisfied.

"Your weapon is hardly short, Eizo," she accused, her expression sullen.

"No, but it's still considerably shorter than a greatsword," I retorted casually.

I was covering all my bases in case Anne was...*you know*. With her height and the reach of a greatsword, she'd be able to cover a vast distance with every swing—even someone equipped with a spear would have trouble dealing with her.

Though I was ninety percent sure we wouldn't have to fight, in case reality fell into the remaining ten percent, she'd be able to deal some major damage, even if she didn't manage to kill anyone in the family. Until I could be completely

sure of her true intentions, it was best to stay on my toes.

That was also the reason I'd given her an entry-level model instead of an elite one; if something were to happen, it was best to minimize the damage.

Unaware of my concerns, Anne strolled through the forest in a chipper mood, as merry as Krul and Lucy were. The only blip on her enjoyment was disappointment at not being able to carry her sword. As if reflecting Anne's joy, sunlight shone through the canopy here and there, so it was bright even under the trees.

We caught sight of squirrel-like critters and a different species of deer than the one we usually hunted. With every new encounter, Anne would inquire about the animal, and Samya would explain.

"Didn't you see any animals yesterday?" I asked Anne.

"There wasn't time for that," she replied.

Aaah, I see.

Even if the worst-case scenario ended up becoming reality, it was still good for Anne to take an interest in the forest. She was less likely to get any weird ideas about a place she had fond memories of...right?

We took our time traveling to the lake, and we eventually arrived at the spot where they'd sunk the boar, albeit later than usual.

"You're right. It's *big*," I said when we arrived.

"Told you," Samya replied proudly.

We had yet to wade into the lake, but I could see the boar's imposing bulk from where I stood. I doubted I was any taller than its shoulders—it looked like it easily weighed five hundred kilograms. I had heard that boars in Europe could grow to that size.

It was practically a monster.

Rike and Lidy stayed on shore to chop lumber, while the rest of us went in to drag the boar out. We fanned out around it, each grabbed a leg, and pulled. Despite the slight buoyancy of the water, it was still unimaginably heavy.

I sighed, “It’s tough hauling this beast even a few steps.”

“Now you see why Anne was so worn out yesterday,” Diana replied.

A day of running around followed by a powerlifting session... No wonder she’d been dead on her feet.

In my last world, there’d been a scene in an anime where a group of hunters used the pelt of a boar to disguise their scent. That plan would’ve been easy to carry out with a boar this size. The body weighed a ton, even without the innards, which had already been removed. Those organs had most certainly been massive as well. They’d likely made quite the feast for any wolves in the area.

With all of our strength combined, we somehow managed to drag the body to shore, where we loaded it onto the pallet that Rike and Lidy had constructed. They’d made a larger one than usual, but the body was still spilling off the sides.

“Okay, Krul, it’s all yours,” I said, rubbing the drake’s neck. “You can stop if it’s too heavy.”

“*Kululululululu*,” she cried, as if to say, “You can count on me!” She took one heavy step forward—I could practically hear her muscles straining—and trudged slowly into the forest.

There was barely any mud left on the ground, but this boar was proving to be a challenge for even Krul to haul...and for good reason. Nonetheless, she heaved forward, walking slower than normal.

Everyone in the family was prepared to jump in and help pull the boar if it proved to be impossible for Krul to carry by herself. Her pace might’ve been a touch slower than usual, but it held steady, so we stayed on the sidelines. Besides, she looked like she was enjoying herself, though that might have been an illusion or a trick of the light.

Lucy ran circles around Krul, barking all the while. “*Arf, rawrf!*” *Go, Big Sis!* It was a heartwarming sight.

However, we didn’t have the time to be enthralled by the pair’s cuteness. We had to look out for Anne’s pursuers, of course, but besides that, we were literally hauling a massive portion of meat. In other words, wild beasts could be

hiding in the shadows with their eyes glued on our prize. Bears and boars were major threats, and wolves could be menaces if a whole pack came at us. It was our job to make sure we didn't overlook any signs of possible attackers.

We spread out slightly and kept our guards up. This was our usual routine, so we didn't need to exchange many words. Anne wasn't sure what to do with herself though and stayed by my side. Helen took the rear. If anything happened, she would demonstrate just how she'd earned the nickname "Lightning Strike."

We got home later than normal, but safe. Next came the butchering, which usually required us to hoist the body up and hang it from a tree. Because of the boar's considerable weight, the choice of branch was crucial. A thin one would snap in a second. However, even if we did manage to hang it, it was so big that I thought we might have trouble reaching the upper part of its body.

In the end, we decided to keep it on the ground. We had Anne help out as well. Her knife might have been an entry-level model, but I could still guarantee its sharpness. Samya taught her how to skin the boar. Her movements were clumsy at first, but she slowly got used to the task. This was fine—since the boar was so large, it wasn't a problem if some extra fat was cut off by accident.

Krul, her work done, was drinking water like it was ambrosia. She and Lucy were relaxing together and watching us work. We labored the entire morning and finally finished a little after noon.

"We really turned it into meat," Anne commented, amazed. She'd just butchered her first animal.

The boar had become familiar cuts of meat like ribs and tenderloin. It was probably fairly rare for nobles to see meat in its raw state.

"This kind of work is integral to our livelihood here in the forest, so we make sure to pay respect to the animals we receive," I explained. "Of course, the people in the city and capital butcher meat too, but the average person doesn't have much of a chance to witness that process."

I tried to impress upon Anne the importance of this belief. However, in doing so, I slipped into full-on preachy ol' geezer mode, which was a touch embarrassing. However, the opportunity to teach a princess didn't come along

very often.

“I see...” Anne mused. Perhaps she had some reservations.

In any case, it wasn't as if I wanted her to preach our ethos back in the empire—I just felt that having even *one* person who understood this philosophy would lead to good things in the future.

After the butchering was complete, we salted one half of the pork and dehydrated the other to preserve it. Of course, I'd already taken out a portion for today's treat. A *large* portion. The yield from the hunt had been plentiful, but the number of big eaters in the house had also increased by one.

Once we finished, Samya immediately yelled, “I'm starving!!!”

“Watch your manners,” Rike chided.

But everyone else was probably famished too. The question was only whether they'd say so out loud.

My suspicions were confirmed when I said, “Hold on a little longer. I'm making us a feast today!”

Samya shouted with joy, but so did Rike, who was beaming from ear to ear.

“Thank you for your patience, ladies,” I said, lining up the dishes made from the freshly butchered pork.

We'd moved the table out onto the terrace for the occasion—here, Krul could eat with us as well.

The first dish was grilled pork seasoned with salt and pepper. The second was a yakiniku-style dish—thinly sliced pork paired with a soy sauce and berry glaze. The last dish was western-style (or here, it was simply the local style) where the pork was topped with a berry compote. I had prepared tenderloin, ribs, and sirloin for each dish, so everyone could sample the different flavors and cuts. Alongside the meat, I served a side of flatbread.

For drinks, there was mint tea, but Rike happily poured herself a cup of brandy. Nothing wrong with that. It was too late in the day to do any work, so alcohol was permitted.

Krul and Lucy were having unseasoned pork that I'd cooked and cooled.

"Itadakimasu," we chorused, our hands raised before us in prayer.

We tucked in.

"I'm sure you have your own likes and dislikes," I said to Anne. "Feel free to eat whatever strikes your fancy."

Since soy sauce was a fermented food, it had a distinct stink. It also wasn't readily available in this region, so people unused to it might be turned off. I thought of it almost like cilantro back on Earth—some people couldn't eat it at first, and some people never warmed up to it no matter how much time passed. Anne had eaten soy-sauce-flavored food with no problem before, but the seasoning was slightly different today.

"Don't worry about me," said Anne. She brought a slice of the yakiniku to her mouth with her fork and took a bite. Her eyes widened.

"H-How is it...?" I asked nervously.

What am I going to do if she says it's completely inedible?

"It's delicious!" she exclaimed.

She likes it! Thank goodness.

She then added, "I bet it would go great with ale."

"That's a popular combination."

There were two camps of people when it came to yakiniku: rice eaters and beer drinkers. Apparently, Anne was the latter. Unfortunately, we had neither beer nor ale in the house. We didn't have rice either. There were grievances on all fronts, but at least it was an even playing field.

I ate a slice of the salt and pepper pork. "The meat is plenty fatty even though the rainy season just ended."

"It's not tough either," Diana added.

I'd heard that meat from large animals tended to be tough. Dense muscle, and lots of it, was needed to support such a large frame, and more muscle was needed to support those muscles...and so forth. Since food was scarce during

the rains, I thought the boar would've shed some fat too, but that didn't appear to be the case. *I wonder...what do the boars in this forest usually eat?*

"This...soy sauce, did you call it? It's good," Anne said.

"It's widely produced in the north. We eat it practically every day. I'm sure the empire could secure a steady supply of it too."

Anne's eyes glittered with excitement. "Oh, really?" She'd been wolfing down slices of yakiniku as if she was determined to finish it all herself.

That was something worth considering—if the empire could either get their hands on a reliable supplier or start producing soy sauce themselves, I might be able to get it for cheaper. As a simple blacksmith, I had no plans to start up a business selling condiments, but if Anne were to sell them, it would be a big help...never mind who inspired her to do it.

Afterward, I fielded all sorts of questions about northern seasonings and ingredients. Not only Anne seemed curious; everyone else had questions too.

According to my installed data, *natto* (fermented soybeans) and *umeboshi* (pickled plum) were also available in this world. When I talked about it, Samya spoke up. "*Natto* has a funky smell...and those sticky bits of slime clinging to it. Isn't it rotten?"

"No, it's not," I answered.

"But it smells like that because it's rancid, right?" Rike asked. "Back at home, we had some beans go bad, and they looked just like *natto*."

"The beans in *natto* have...*broken down* in a sense...but not in a way that's going to hurt your stomach. It's good for you."

"Broken down? So you mean it's rotten," Helen insisted.

"It's not!" I insisted. "It's like cheese."

"We eat cheese with some meals in the empire, but cheese has a more mild smell, you know?"

Cheesemaking involves lactic fermentation by bacteria and coagulation by enzymes. However, even though it's fermented, cheese doesn't stink (other than washed-rind cheeses). Guess I picked the wrong example...

I hesitated to explain the process more thoroughly—after all, bacteria hadn't even been discovered in this world. Without that crucial piece of the puzzle, trying to clear up the difference between fermentation and spoilage was like pulling teeth. After all, the critical mechanism behind both processes was the same.

It looked like serving *natto* in this house was going to be a dream within a dream...

We finished dinner at a half-baked hour. There wasn't enough time left in the day for work, but there was too much time for play. Even if I were to practice making armor, I had to heat the firebed, and by the time I finished preparing, there wouldn't be much time to do anything.

"Maybe I should get some exercise once in a while," I murmured.

My job as a blacksmith and my daily chores gave me plenty of opportunity to move around, but I didn't participate in the hunts, nor did I join in the sparring—I'd yielded the trainer position to Helen.

I wasn't getting chunky around the middle per se...but I knew that getting exercise outside of work was an important part of staying healthy. Every year in my former world, my annual physical had come back with the same command: exercise. That was the stereotypical result for desk jockeys.

So, I grabbed the wooden katana and headed outside.

When Helen noticed me approaching, she called, "You're gonna join us today, Eizo?"

"Yeah. I'll get rusty if I don't practice once in a while."

I doubted my skills would be affected by a few sips of alcohol since I relied almost purely on my cheats when it came to combat. Nevertheless, whether I exercised regularly or not made a difference in a fight—a difference that was the most obvious at a dire moment. There was no harm in getting a bit of exercise. It was also an opportunity to take stock of my abilities.

"All right!" Helen yelled. "You, me, showdown! Now!"

I nodded. "Sounds good to me."

“Score!”

This was the happiest I’d seen her since she’d moved in with us. The only time she’d been more excited was during her first trip here to commission a weapon.

Just in case, I warmed up my muscles. I didn’t want to be beholden to customs from my previous world, but this had to do with my own health. Besides, if I strained something because I failed to stretch, my work would suffer.

“Someone’s fired up,” Diana teased.

“This way I’ll be less likely to injure myself,” I told her.

“Really?”

“Well, that’s what my grandfather taught me.”

“Northern customs sure are fascinating. They’re an interesting mix of ceremonial and practical.”

“That might be true,” I agreed, latching onto her thoughtful interpretation.

After a few final full-body stretches, I picked up the wooden katana and turned to face Helen. She did the same, wooden versions of her dual blades in hand.

I bowed. Helen returned the gesture by bringing her swords close to her chest. Then, we took our stances. I brought the katana straight out in front of me, aiming at Helen’s eyes, and she brandished both swords before her.

Squaring off, I could feel her excitement rising. Along with it, the pressure she exerted grew exponentially. I felt as if I was staring down a gigantic wolf. A common foot soldier or one of the goblins I’d fought would’ve probably lost their will to fight from Helen’s sheer intimidation.

We each took our time gauging the distance between us. My weapon could cover a longer distance, but Helen’s speed would make up for what she lacked in reach.

A moment passed. Then...

Helen vanished in front of my eyes.

“You’re too fast!” I cried.

She wasn’t called Lightning Strike for nothing. I had an inkling of which direction she was going to attack from, and I whipped my katana around. Right now, all I could do was defend against her incoming attack—no more, no less.

The clunk of our weapons clashing rang out through the clearing, and the impact jolted through my hand. I squeezed my fist tight. Forget about retaliation, it took everything I had just to hold onto my katana.

Helen grinned, having retreated a few paces. “I guess it’s gonna take more than one blow to settle this.”

Silence trailed in the wake of our paused attacks, and I heard Diana and Anne talking on the side.

“Did you follow that?” Diana asked.

“I saw Eizo narrowly block the attack, but until then, not a thing,” admitted Anne.

“Same here.”

Helen was watching me even more intensely than before. *Damn... She’s fired up now.*

I rolled my shoulders lightly, focusing every fiber of my being on the battle in front of me, then raised my wooden katana once more. Neither my movement nor agility could match Helen’s—that meant I would have to compete with weight and precision.

Helen might’ve been able to balance her shorter reach with her speed, but physically speaking, the reach of my weapon was still longer. Helen was taller, so her arms were longer as well, but our weapons’ lengths were incomparable.

“*Hah,*” I huffed, launching into a combo of swift thrusts. The wooden swords we used for sparring were essentially dense, heavy wooden clubs, and each one of my swings was strong enough to incapacitate your average bandit.

Helen was not your average bandit. She easily parried my blows with one sword, countering with the other.

I drew back my katana and blocked her blow, leaving my flank deliberately

open.

As planned, Helen lasered in on the opening, her sword shooting toward me. If the blow had connected, wooden sword or not, I would've been down a rib or two...but I twisted my hand and somehow fended off the attack.

Every breath meant a new opportunity to strike or another attack to fend off. However, I was only getting one hit to every two of Helen's. I would be in dire straits if the fight continued this way. Since my reach was longer, I thought I would be able to hold my own, but Helen wiped out that advantage with her terrifying speed.

"You're serious," I said, keeping my eye out for any chinks in her iron defense. I had hoped to distract her even briefly, but her guard was solid.

She grinned. "Who's the one who went in for a kill just a second ago?"

I guess I was the one who'd incited her. No use complaining about it now.

"Shall we continue?"

"That's what I like to hear!" she cheered.

We both retreated and took a deep breath. Simultaneously, we slowly exhaled. Then, we attacked.

Over dinner that night, Diana remarked, "It was like watching two tornadoes collide."

In the end, Helen and I had continued to fight for half an hour longer. I had grown tired first, lowering my katana and thus bringing our sparring session to an end.

Diana, who fought Helen regularly, had been able to follow our movements to some extent. However, the others were a different story...

"It was amazing," Samya gushed. "Super awesome."

"Took all I had just to follow it," Anne said.

"I just barely managed to keep up, but I couldn't tell what was happening at all," groaned Lidy.

“My eyes couldn’t pick out anything,” Rike admitted.

The veteran hunter Samya (limited vocabulary notwithstanding) and Anne, who likely had some weapon training, had been able to keep up with the exchange of blows. Lidy had sharp eyes from living in the forest—a different forest—and had just barely been able to make out our attacks. Rike, on the other hand, hadn’t been able to see anything at all. She looked frustrated. She might have been a dwarf, but by trade, she was a blacksmith. There were always other areas she could put her efforts into, right?

“Hmmm, I have to work harder,” Diana said, taking a bite of meat.

If Diana grew too strong, I wouldn’t be able to look Marius in the eyes, so I hoped she would hold back a little. However, the young lady herself was burning with determination, and the idea of interfering with her resolution pricked at my conscience.

I looked at Helen, who was gorging herself on meat. She met my worried gaze with a mischievous smile. *She has every intention of training Diana, and training her well.*

“Maybe I should practice too...” Rike mumbled.

“Why not start from the basics of wielding a knife?” suggested Lidy. Despite the elf’s delicate appearance, she was a menace with a knife.

“That’s true...that way I won’t be a burden on Boss in a pinch.”

If Rike polished her combat skills, then she would be okay even if something were to happen to me. From that perspective, it was hard for me to put a stop to her wish.

My stomach twisted, raising a tiny voice of protest against the inevitability of the women around me growing stronger and stronger and stronger.

###

In the forge the next morning, we all got to work once more. Everyone besides me and Rike made plate metal and molds, then filled said molds with molten steel for the casts. Rike and I were making swords and knives.

Back to Forge Eizo’s regularly scheduled programming.

Since Anne was our guest, I had told her over and over that she didn't need to help, but she always countered with, "There is nothing else to do," and proactively pitched in wherever she could. She tackled the work with vigor, be it shaping molds from clay or hammering out the plates. The road was bumpy at first, but soon, she began to seek out advice from Samya and the others of her own volition.

"Helen, I can't seem to shape this part of the mold well."

"Put more strength into compacting the clay," Helen advised her.

"L-Like this?"

"Exactly. Any gaps will make Eizo and Rike's job harder later on."

She would also ask questions: "Why aren't my plates as uniform as yours, Lidy?"

"Hmmm, try to pour at a more consistent speed," Lidy instructed.

"It's so difficult."

"Metal doesn't behave quite the same as water, right? I found it tough at first too."

In this way, Anne hustled cheerfully alongside everyone in the family. Work was work, but it was important that joy could be found. After all, the goal was to live a quiet, peaceful life.

One day, in the middle of work, I sighed, "I'm itching to take a trip once everything calms down."

I felt most relaxed here in the workshop, hammering away, and it wasn't as if I was particularly stressed. We regularly took breaks, and meals together were a good way to unwind too. However, a change of scenery was nice once in a while. Invigorating.

Anne curled up on herself. "I'm sorry."

I've put my foot in my mouth. That was careless.

I hurried to reassure her, "Don't be, don't be. It's not your fault, Anne. Once this is all over, if you have even a little time, you should come with us."

“Do you mean it?!” she exclaimed, brightening up.

“Of course.”

Her smile bloomed like a flower unfurling its petals, and her somber mood a second ago flipped on its head. There was still the possibility that Anne was the mastermind behind everything...but the likelihood was minuscule. The incident that had triggered all of this hadn't been well-coordinated.

If Anne meant to do us harm or forcibly drag me to the empire, she'd had plenty of chances. She might have been waiting for the perfect opportunity, but this was an unusually long amount of time to wait. No matter how high-quality my work was purported to be, would the empire really expend so much effort to take care of one blacksmith? I didn't think so.

In conclusion, I figured there should be no problems taking Anne out to fish—or perhaps on a picnic—at the end of her stay with us. That would be one last guard mission for me.

“Let's make one good memory together before you go,” I told her.

“I guess...you're right,” Anne replied wistfully.

Had she grown to like living here? I hoped she would go home thinking, “Life in that forest is peaceful. On the part of the empire, we shouldn't do anything to disrupt it.”

At the moment, we had Marius (and the margrave) on our side keeping trouble at bay, so we shouldn't have any need to worry. As we spoke, they were likely running around to douse the flames of the current situation. *Any help they can give is truly a blessing.*

Holding onto those feelings of gratitude in my heart, I focused even more energy into my hammer, clanging down on the sword before me.

We'd decided to add spears to our usual lineup. That said, the plan was to produce only about eight in total.

In terms of quality, three would be elite models and five entry-level. They were going to be the same shape as the ones we made for the bulk order a while back. Just in case Camilo refused to take them (although I didn't think he

would), it was a small enough quantity that we could keep them for ourselves without issue. We now had a storehouse to keep them in too.

I worked more efficiently than I used to when it came to anything production-related, so I didn't have to decrease my quota for elite model knives or swords either. I couldn't assign myself endless amounts of new work without sacrificing anything, but a few extra spears weren't going to make a difference.

"Your speed is as astonishing as always, Boss," Rike said.

"Maybe, but even I have my limits," I replied.

"That might be so, but you still do the work of three...no, *more than* three blacksmiths combined."

"Really... Hmm, it'd be a problem if we ran out of work because of that."

"It's certainly an issue to consider. However, in terms of quantity, we're putting out knives and swords for the whole region. Like you said, there's a cap to how much we can produce and still sell. With Camilo working to circulate our products, we might hit that limit in the near future, but they can always be stocked up for later on."

Since Camilo always bought up whatever we made, we'd just been making however much we could without holding back. However, it could be smart to expand our range like we were doing with the spears, all while keeping the total number of items we delivered the same.

We didn't have to limit ourselves to weapons and armor either. It could be fun to make household goods like scissors (both *U*-shaped ones and *X*-shaped ones), saws, or pots. Come to think of it, I'd given up on making farming tools since I hadn't attracted any buyers in the city, but if Camilo was going to buy them, we could start making sickles again too.

However, we could run into the same problem with the new products if we started churning them out en masse. *I'll consult Camilo the next time we make a delivery.* Personally, I'd be satisfied as long as we all had enough to eat.

Those thoughts preoccupied me for the next few days while we completed the weapons in our standing order to Camilo. Delivery day eve rolled around. Again, I wavered over whether to take Anne with us, but in the end, I decided

it'd be better if Anne came along—it would be useful to have her there in case of new developments to her situation...even if that meant hiding her beneath a cloth and sneaking her in as luggage.

When I told Anne the plan, she asked, “Are you positive?”

“That’s what I want to ask you. It’ll be extremely cramped in the cart,” I warned.

“That is perfectly fine.”

“I can guarantee your safety though. You’ll have several excellent guards with you.”

“I’m not worried on that front. I’ve had plenty of opportunities—perhaps too many, in fact—to witness the veracity of that statement for myself,” she said. “I leave myself in your capable hands.”

The next morning, Anne got ready to go out alongside the rest of us. *Is it just me, or does she look excited?* She was just as amped up as she had been before the hunting trip.

Anne’s enthusiasm infected Lucy as well. The pup ran circles around us as we prepared, soothing our hearts.

After we’d packed everything in, Rike climbed into the driver’s seat. Next, I climbed into the back with Anne, carrying a cloth sheet. I guided her to sit in an inconspicuous place shadowed by the luggage. Everyone aside from Diana climbed in too. Then it was Lucy and Diana’s turn.

Strangely, Lucy backed away from the cart.

I was wondering what she was doing when she broke out into a mad dash, flying straight toward us like an arrow. Then, she sprang into the air.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed involuntarily.

Lucy’s jump cleared the cart. I swore I could see a ring of stars glittering around her.

She padded over to me with her head held high and proud. I petted her and cheered, “Great job!”

“Ruff!!!”

Lastly, Diana clambered aboard, though her expression was somewhat forlorn.

Krul trilled once, and we started to move forward, our drake-drawn cart proceeding into a world of green and black. We could hear small birds chirping around us. Indifferent to our nerves and tension, the atmosphere in the forest was tranquil.

“Considering everything that’s going on, isn’t it ironic that it’s actually more peaceful here in the forest?” I commented.

Diana stared at me critically. “You’re the only one who could say something like that, Eizo.”

The Black Forest was feared by people around the world (allegedly), but I really couldn’t see what everyone was so afraid of. Not when we were riding through such serenity and calm.

However, to summarize what I’d heard from my family and Anne, the forest was vast and the animals that lived here were strong. Even fairly skilled fighters could end up dead after stepping into its bounds—if not instantly, then they’d be gone in a relatively short time.

That was apparently the reason why a significant number of beastfolk nested in the boughs of the trees, as well as why they kept few belongings and changed their dens often.

Nevertheless, to me, the forest was the definition of peace. Here, I didn’t have to think about the turmoil in the outside world nor worry about an enemy ambush.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean we could live a quiet life out here without interacting with any other people at all. We might’ve been able to hunt and gather our own food, but if we were to cut all connections with the world, it would be difficult to secure a steady supply of salt and other seasonings.

Our cart journeyed through the serene forest and emerged onto the road.

Before we left the safety of the trees, I had Anne huddle up smaller. I then

covered her with the sheet. The result looked a little unusual, but I thought she could still pass as baggage.

The city guards knew our faces, so hopefully they'd let us through without question. It dinged my conscience to be deceiving them like this, but we had no other choice.

We kept our guards up on the road. Thanks to the margrave and Marius's efforts, crooks would think twice before ambushing travelers here. This was Marius's—and the Eimoor family's—territory. But if we failed to keep watch, it would do no good to cry after something happened. Just in case, we stayed alert.

As far as appearances went, all was well on the road today. The sunlight fell softly over the plains, lighting the contrast of the green against the blue as if to cover up what might be happening behind the scenes. It was too bad we couldn't show Anne this scenery.

Soon, we arrived at the entrance to the city. My nerves were strung tight, but I did my best to pretend everything was normal.

"Hello," I called.

The guard (we were acquainted with most of the guards, and this one was likely no exception) turned a suspicious gaze on us. As expected of a pro. They were hard to trick.

We might have to fess up and tell the truth.

Or so I was thinking. "Oh, it's you folks," the guard said curtly. "Good work." He then turned back to look at the road.

Had he not realized our deception? Or was he choosing to overlook it? I wasn't sure.

Rike twisted to look at me. I signaled her with my eyes. She nodded and urged Krul to pick up speed again. We'd cleared the first checkpoint.

Inside the city, the number of people increased, which meant we had to keep track of more targets. However, this was Lucy's time to shine.

She stuck her head out of the cart as usual, drawing everyone's gazes. That

meant anyone looking in our direction who *wasn't* staring at Lucy was suspicious. We made our way to Camilo's store focusing our attention on anything out of the ordinary. The shop boy came out to greet us as usual...but today, the head clerk was with him too.

"I was expecting your arrival, so I came out to meet you. We will take over from here. Please, make your way upstairs," he urged.

When I informed him we had brought Anne along, he looked surprised but merely said, "Well, well...that is convenient in its own way."

We looked at him, puzzled by the vague response, as we disembarked and proceeded to the second floor. Moving as a group, we swarmed up to the conference room.

"How do you feel?" I asked Anne.

She'd been hunched down in a cramped space covered with a cloth for a decidedly not-short length of time. It must have been rough.

But contrary to my expectations, Anne replied with a smile, "I'm all right. I'm used to being stationary."

I suppose that was her experience as the seventh imperial princess—she must've been put into many situations where she had to sit still for several hours at a time, all with a smile plastered on her face.

Is she really used to it? I wondered. At the same time, the idea disturbed me. Had it really been necessary for her to become accustomed to such conditions?

"As long as you're really all right" was all I could say in response.

Camilo's shop was large, but it still took less than five minutes for us to go from the back courtyard to the second-floor conference room. We opened the door.

When we entered, we were greeted by Camilo's ever-familiar smiling and bearded face. "Ah, you're here."

He was accompanied by two other people.

"Count Eimoor. It is a pleasure to see you again after all this time." I offered a bow.

One of Camilo's companions was Marius, dressed in simple garb. Had we been alone, I would've addressed him by his name, but I didn't because Anne was here. That, and one additional reason...

"My Lord. It has been a while," I added.

Together with Marius was the margrave. He was clothed in an outfit just as modest as Marius's. There was no way I could speak familiarly with Marius in front of the margrave.

The two men returned my bows with nods.

I was just pondering what to do about Anne when she swept into an elegant curtsy. "Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am the seventh princess of the empire, Annemarie Christine Weisner. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Count Eimoor, Margrave Menzel."

I could only stand flustered beside her.

The two men went to their knees and bowed their heads.

"You honor us with your presence, Your Highness. My name is Gregor Wilhelm Menzel, a margrave in the kingdom."

"I am Count Marius Albert Eimoor. I, too, am a citizen of the kingdom."

"I thank you for the courtesy," Anne said in response to their introductions.

They both rose. We took our seats.

The margrave dropped heavily into his chair and declared in a low but firm voice, "Now then, let's put an end to the formalities. Your Highness as well."

From this point on, we would disregard our relative social positions, and everything said was to be kept a strict secret. Anne nodded in agreement too.

"I'd like to push the blame for the latest incident onto Eizo, but...my request was actually what started it all. I'm sorry," the margrave apologized, bowing his head without any reluctance.

Nothing that happened here would leave this room, but nonetheless, few people in his position would be willing to lower themselves so easily. After all, he was a cabinet minister of the kingdom as well as a margrave.

“Please raise your head,” I said, waving a hand in dismissal. “I should have anticipated this possibility.”

There had always been a chance that my weapons would end up in the empire before they had completely circulated within the kingdom (to use an exaggerated example). Inevitably, this would have led to someone from the empire taking steps to contact me. What was unusual in this case was that the leaked weapons were custom ones—weapons I’d made with my full abilities. Nevertheless, even if the empire had only seen my normal work, it would have been only a matter of time before they inquired about my skills.

With a grunt of acknowledgment, the margrave sat back up, and Marius took over the conversation. “You heard that there were people from the kingdom who were involved too, right?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

Catalina had come to inform us of that when we’d made our last delivery. However, we didn’t know anything other than the simple fact that someone in the kingdom had a hand in the affair.

“We investigated the incident afterward. The wretches showed their true colors even faster than we’d imagined. Perhaps they panicked after finding out their scheme had failed. They’d hired thugs from the empire.”

“Then the men we killed were...?”

“Yeah—empire crooks they snuck in with their influence. As for who was pulling the strings, that has nothing to do with you all. Leave it for us to clean up.”

I peeked over at Anne. There were no visible changes in her expression, but I recalled what she’d said before—it was possible that her older brother was masterminding everything.

“I’ll strategize a way to wrap this affair up,” the margrave said.

“Our fundamental stance is that we were unwittingly pulled into the empire’s mess, but I must say, My Lord, you’ve quite shrewdly come in at just the right time,” remarked Marius.

“Now hold on. I’ve suffered over this incident as well.”

“I know.”

Marius and the margrave exchanged words like they were trading blows with invisible swords. This verbal sparring was likely on the subdued side too, a bit of banter between friends. If we’d been at the royal palace, the conversation may have been more poisonous.

“So? What happens now?” I asked.

“Fundamentally, it’s the empire’s problem, so it logically follows that it’s their responsibility to clean things up. However, since someone from our side was involved as well, we can’t play dumb.” Marius paused, hesitating over whether to explain further. Even knowing we’d been dragged into this affair a long time ago, he was probably still reluctant to involve us any more than he had to.

I stayed silent but nodded for him to continue.

“We have a request for you, Eizo,” he said eventually. “We want you to forge us weapons—ones of the highest caliber.”

“Hold on. You know my condition for commissions, right?” I asked, shooting Camilo a glance. When he noticed me looking, he nodded to show that he had already explained.

Anyone who wanted a weapon had to visit our forge in person and alone. That was a rule I would have even the ruler of the empire abide by.

Strictly speaking, I’d made an exception once when Camilo had asked me to forge a mithril sword. Marius was probably making the request knowing that fact, but there were still procedures for this kind of thing.

“Of course we know,” the margrave interjected with a nonplussed expression. “However, I do not know the location of your domicile. Or rather, he would not say.”

The reason Camilo hadn’t told him was probably not because he was “unworthy,” but rather, because Camilo was trying to prevent more danger from befalling us.

“I know we are deviating from your rule, but this is the fastest resolution to

our current situation,” Marius said, bowing his head. “I hope you’ll understand.”

If they had simply wanted to give us an update, the margrave could have come alone (or more to the point, they could’ve summoned me to the capital). Marius had likely accompanied him on this trip for this very purpose.

At the very least, I couldn’t deny that I was more easily swayed when someone I considered a friend was begging for my help.

I folded my arms to think. “Hmmmm.”

Truth be told, I was amenable to anything as long as no harm would come to my family. Ideally, that included Anne as well. Strangers were one thing, but I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I endangered people I knew.

I opened my mouth to ask for Marius’s guarantee of everyone’s safety. That was when Diana planted her hands on the table and said, “Brother.” Her eyes locked onto Marius, her gaze unforgiving.

“Hm? What is it, Diana?”

“You’re not going to involve Eizo in anything dangerous, are you?”

“I’ll do my best to make sure nothing happens to him.”

“Got it.” She retook her seat. The others nodded in response to Marius’s declaration.

The decision was now in my hands. “There’s one thing I’d like to confirm.”

“Go on.”

“This isn’t going to put my family at risk either, right?”

Marius met my gaze, his face serious. “No. You have my word.”

Samya stayed quiet, which meant that he wasn’t bluffing. *I guess that settles my concerns.*



“All right. I’ll do it.”

“Thanks,” said Marius. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“So? What do you want me to make?”

“Spears,” he answered. “Four of them.”

“Four?”

It was an easy quantity to forge...but why did they need exactly four? That detail nagged at me, but I had a strong feeling that asking would only drag me deeper into the mire.

“Okay. The design is up to me, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. But all four should be the same.”

“You want four identical spears?”

“Yes.”

They didn’t need weapons in bulk but required spears that were indistinguishable from one another...

The plot thickens. But ignorance is bliss...

“Don’t worry,” the margrave assured us. His lips quirked upward. “We won’t let harm befall you.”

His reassurance only disconcerted me further, but what was I to do?

I furrowed my brows and grimaced. “Fine. But I’m only doing this *one* time,” I warned.

Frankly, trouble had darkened our doorstep a long time ago, back when Anne had first come to our forge.

I wanted our agreement drawn up in writing, but there was no one who could act as a guarantor (we could have Camilo stand in, but he was only a merchant), so there was little meaning to creating a contract.

“Sorry about all this. And thanks,” said Marius, his face troubled.

The job of a middleman was as tough here as it was in my previous world. *I should take that into consideration...at least, internally.*

“We do not wish to incur your ire by asking for the impossible. That would only trouble us in the long run,” the margrave added. His expression was as bitter as mine.

Was he speaking from experience? Had he angered a craftsman in the past with a request? His glower didn’t seem to be directed at me so much as at his memories. Apparently, this was another similarity between my previous world and this one: the hardheadedness of craftsmen.

I’d come to live in the Black Forest through impossible circumstances, but the margrave wasn’t aware of that. As far as he was concerned, if he made an unreasonable request and I left the kingdom because of it, that would be a loss for the kingdom.

The best option for me right now was to go along with his calculation. *Who knows whether I’ll meet another person like Camilo in the future?*

“What of the deadline and payment?” I asked.

“Hmm, give me a minute.” The margrave considered my question—he probably had more than one plan in motion. He was just another geezer I should avoid getting involved with politically...or otherwise.

“The faster, the better,” he concluded. “When can you finish them by?”

“Let me see...three days?”

Since they had commissioned four spears, they most likely weren’t looking for anything fancy or adorned. In fact, the request was for identical spears, so in this case, unembellished was probably better because the spears would be harder to tell apart.

Taking that into account, each spear would take some time to forge, but three days turnaround should be plenty of time for four. In my past life, I had nothing but bad memories of tasks that had an “ASAP” deadline, but working conditions were more reasonable in this world...right?

The margrave didn’t try to hide his surprise. He raised an eyebrow. “So soon?”

“Well, yes.”

Drat. I should've said, "Hmm, I don't know. Maybe two weeks?"

Although, thinking back, we'd forged fifty spears in a single week before, so it would've been impossible to lie either way. *Yeah, I'll just tell myself that.*

"I see. In that case, I'll give you fifteen gold per spear," the margrave declared.

"Huh?! Wh—uh—huh?"

In my opinion, that was way too much for a simple spear...even a custom model. I was about to tell him that I would happily take ten gold when hands shot out from both sides to stop me from speaking.

Sixty gold, all in all. If I thought of part of it as hush money, then it wasn't a preposterous amount...probably.

"So," the margrave continued, "can you deliver the goods to the capital in four day's time?"

"To the capital?" I asked.

"Yes."

What are they planning in the capital? They assured me they weren't going to involve me in any risky business. I want to believe my role will be over after I drop off the spears.

"I'll send a carriage to bring you—and Her Highness—to the capital," Camilo said.

"Anne as well?" I asked.

Camilo nodded.

Everything's already worked out. They were just waiting for me to forge the spears.

"I got it. My family should...not come with us, I suppose," I said, looking at Marius's expression.

That meant this was to be mostly a normal delivery run, but there were things that Marius and company didn't want the others to know.

Diana looked dissatisfied. I could only respond with a placating gesture.

In any case, that brought our negotiations to an end. I stood and shook hands with the margrave and Marius.

Time for me to buckle down.

After we talked, Marius and the margrave left the room. They couldn't stay away from the capital for too long, and it would also look suspicious for both of them to be gone at the same time.

"Now, on to our business," Camilo continued nonchalantly.

I relaxed a fraction. "Yeah."

The sidelines were fine, but really, I didn't want to get involved with politics at all. I took a sip of the tea that the staff had prepared. Truthfully, I hadn't even noticed it was there until now, and it had already cooled completely. *Goes to show how on edge I was...*

"You brought your usual inventory?" asked Camilo.

"Well, actually..." I explained my plan to expand our range of weapons and told him we'd brought spears. I made sure to mention their excellent quality and how they were on par with our elite models.

"If only you'd made custom model spears, you would've been spared the trouble of forging more!" Camilo guffawed.

Seriously, though. If I'd known before that they needed spears, I would've forged custom models and brought them with me today. Not that there was a way for them to have contacted me.

"Anyway, I made these spears of my own volition, but will you take them off my hands?" I requested.

Camilo agreed instantly. "Not a problem. Your works fly right off the shelves."

At least that's one less thing to worry about. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rike's expression turn smug.

"I'll be making an assortment of new products from here on out," I added.

"Thanks."

"It's nothing. This is what I do."

The cool and aloof smile Camilo adopted didn't sit quite right on his face, but I kept that to myself. He then exited, leaving us alone in the room. The head clerk wasn't in attendance today, so Camilo most likely had to arrange the order himself.

Diana huffed. "Well, it certainly appears that things are moving," she grumbled, exasperated.

"I would've thought you'd be used to plots and intrigue," I said.

She might have acclimated to living in the forest, but she was still Marius's little sister—in other words, the young mistress of a comital family. Thankfully, she wasn't playing the role of a villainess. I had assumed that any noble would've heard of—if not played a hand in—one or two such incidents.

"Daughter of a count or not, families renowned for their accomplishments on the battlefield like mine are seldom visited by people with such tedious and circuitous stratagems," Diana explained.

"Ahh..."

It wasn't a lack of intelligence that prevented them from being approached. Rather, her family was more the type to counter such an invitation with, "How 'bout we bust in through the front door and punch their teeth in." Frankly, an all-rounder like Marius was probably the outlier.

"You're probably familiar with that world, right, Anne?" Diana asked.

Anne startled as if someone had thrown water in her face, but she quickly recovered. "Eh? Yes, well, to some extent..." Considering everything that had happened since she'd come to our forge, Anne had definitely been involved in her fair share of schemes.

"Well, for the time being, let's do what needs to be done and wrap everything up safely," I said.

Everyone, including Anne, nodded in agreement. I hoped to return to our days of peace and quiet as soon as possible.

Camilo returned as we were wrapping up our discussion. "You've really spoiled me this time."

“Are you talking about the spears?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

With every new item I crafted, the quality of all of my work ticked slowly but surely upward. My “stats” weren’t shown numerically the way they were in the novels of my previous world, but I could still tell my skills were improving. And, with the approval of a seasoned veteran like Camilo, I could be assured that I had nothing to worry about in terms of quality.

“That’s everything I have for you today,” I told him.

“Thanks a ton.” He passed me a leather pouch and winked. As usual, the gesture didn’t suit him at all.

“Don’t mention it. That’s what I do, you know?” I responded lightly. “And same here. Thanks.”

Do the work. Receive compensation. I was grateful I could make ends meet by working at a leisurely pace and making whatever I liked.

“Oh, by the way,” Camilo said, suddenly seeming to remember something. “So, about this whole ‘I could’ve prepared if only I’d known’ dilemma—it’s bound to happen once in a while, right? Like today.”

“Pretty much.”

That was exactly the situation today. Had they possessed the means to contact me beforehand, I one hundred percent would’ve forged the spears in advance. The only other communication method we’d used—besides us making the trip here in person—was the emergency measure we came up with during the whole Eimoor succession debacle.

Using that method, Camilo’s messengers could drop off the missive on their way between the city and the capital, so it might not be overly inconvenient from Camilo’s perspective. However, on my end, I had to make the trip to the forest entrance. Traveling two kilometers every day just to check the mail was, to be blunt, a hassle.

But if I sent someone from the family, we would lose a pair of hands in the forge, and I wanted to avoid that if possible. Smoke signals stood out too much.

Plus, since we were situated in the middle of the forest, it would be nearly impossible to see a signal sent up near the border.

And that was why we were currently limited to these weekly or biweekly talks, even though it ate up a lot of time.

“I want to figure out a better way,” Camilo said. “Someday, I might need to contact you in an emergency.”

“Mmhmm.”

He was absolutely right. Nevertheless, I cringed at the thought of other people being able to bother me at all times of the day. My ultimate goal was a quiet life. To that end, I wanted to take things slow and easy. But taking that mindset too far was akin to walking down the road to starvation. Until the day I could play hard without working hard, I had to keep up with my trade.

“Maybe you’ll be the one needing to send a message to me. To postpone the week’s delivery, for example,” Camilo added.

“That’s true.”

Up until this point, I hadn’t gotten seriously sick or injured. Perhaps I had the Watchdog to thank for that. However, that may have been because I hadn’t been in this world for long. I couldn’t avoid falling ill forever, and when that day came, it would certainly be useful to have a method of contacting Camilo.

“Aren’t there any magical items that let you send a letter back and forth?” I asked.

“Weeell, it’s not that there aren’t *any*...”

I had asked offhandedly, not expecting Camilo to actually say “yes.” If they existed, why weren’t they more common?

“They’re prohibitively expensive though, and there are restrictions on who’s allowed to own one,” Camilo finished.

I see. A communication method so convenient would be an important strategic tool for the military. It would be a problem if anyone could contact people in neighboring nations whenever they wanted, so the use of the method was restricted on purpose.

“Well, let me spin my wheels on it,” Camilo said. “That is, if you have no objections.”

“No, we’re on board.”

“All right.”

It didn’t look like it was going to cause any problems for the time being, so we’d go along with Camilo.

“Then I suppose I’ll see you in four days,” he said.

“Yeah.”

Camilo and I shook hands. The head clerk came into the room as we were leaving. We offered greetings and goodbyes, then all swarmed out of the shop.

“It’s straight to work for me once we’re home,” I remarked.

The others in my family immediately offered to help. I’d had to compromise our forge’s rule for this commission (never mind that the request had come from a friend), and yet even Anne said she would lend a hand. Their support made me feel warm inside, and I made sure to thank them.

Today, we had gone up to the conference room right after we’d arrived. When we slipped around back, we found the shop boy looking after Krul and Lucy as usual.

“Sorry for all the trouble,” I told him.

“I don’t mind. Lucy’s gotten real big.” He scratched her on the head.

“She has, hasn’t she?”

Lucy was still the size of a puppy (a wolf puppy), but in this short time, she’d grown a lot. She was even able to jump into the cart all by herself now.

I didn’t know whether she was so large because she was a magical beast or because forest wolves were large to begin with. Considering the rapid pace at which she was maturing, there was a lot we would need to plan going forward.

After I tipped the apprentice, we set off. I had Anne hide under the cloth again while we were in the city. Since our overall luggage hadn’t decreased, Anne didn’t stick out. In fact, the supplies we usually carried back from Camilo’s

might actually take up a little *more* space than the weapons we brought to the city (mostly because of the charcoal, soil, and ore).

A different guard stood at the gate, but he was still a familiar face. My heart rate sped up during our brief exchange, but he let us through without saying much. There was no reason for him to bar us from leaving.

We left the city for the road. A pleasant breeze was blowing across the grassy plains just like it had been in the morning. It was as if a god or some other high being was running a hand across a green carpet. The sky was a beautiful clear blue, lit by the shining sun. I was again hit with regret that we couldn't show Anne this scenery.

On the way home, we briefly discussed the possibility of letting her come out for a minute. A couple of seconds couldn't hurt, right? However, in the end, we decided it would be best to ride through without stopping until we were back in the forest...just in case.

Hopefully, if all goes according to plan, Anne will at least be able to enjoy the landscape on her way back to the empire.

A short while after we reentered the forest, I removed the cloth covering Anne.

"Mmm—aaaah!" She sighed as she stretched luxuriously from head to toe, expanding to take up even more space than she usually did.

"Rough ride, huh?" I remarked.

"Not at all," she replied. "It was much smoother than I was expecting. I'm perfectly all right."

"That's good to hear."

Our cart should be more comfortable than the average cart. With its suspension system, it was a few steps ahead of the era's technological landscape. There was, however, no reason for me to volunteer that information to Anne.

The journey through the forest wasn't *as* pleasant as riding through the fields, but the good weather brightened up the usual gloom beneath the canopy. We

spent nearly all our time in the forest, so it rarely occurred to me, but it was a special privilege to be able to take in and savor the fragrance of the trees.

Once in a while, Lucy would spot a deer or squirrel and her tail would whir to life. My shoulder's HP would drain accordingly (but I had a feeling you-know-who had started to go easy on me recently). Otherwise, our return back to the cabin was uneventful.

We unloaded the cart and stored everything away, dividing the work among ourselves. Afterward, we gathered in the living area.

As we all sipped our tea, I said, "I wonder if they want Anne to come...so they can send her straight back after."

Diana nodded. "That's possible." There was little reason for Anne to come with me otherwise. It was one last danger to surmount. "In the current situation," she continued, "the best option for getting her back safely would be to pretend she is a special diplomatic envoy, even if they don't make a big deal publicly. That way, she could be escorted by guards."

"Won't it be a problem that she came here in secret?" I asked,

"Some kind of excuse can always be found for that. Her entry was covered up to avoid unnecessarily courting trouble with the neighboring nations...or something to that effect. But it's moot anyway. Anne's return journey must not draw attention."

"Can a diplomatic conference at the margrave's residence be used as a pretense?"

"She might even have to pay a visit to the Silver Palace," Diana added nonchalantly.

In response, Anne said, "I may be the youngest of seven, but I *am* still an imperial princess."

The Silver Palace was apparently a residence used by the royal family for formal talks with key figures from other countries. Incidentally, the manor wasn't decorated with silver ornaments or anything. The lofty name might have simply been to indicate the generous hospitality shown toward guests. That kind of roundabout posturing went right over my head though.

“Having such talks at the residence of a person who is a minister *and* a margrave isn’t such a slight, but for a face-to-face meeting, it would still be more appropriate for a member of the royal family to report to the Silver Palace,” Diana explained.

Truly, Diana and Anne belong to a different world.

It was time for me to stop pondering. Everything would be resolved in four days’ time, one way or another. In the meantime, all I could do was pour my soul into forging the spears and making Anne feel comfortable.

###

The next day, after our morning chores, we went together into the workshop. While I lit the furnace and firebed, the others milled around, stretching and chatting.

This atmosphere reminded me of the opening shift at part-time jobs on Earth. All right, that was pretty much exactly what we were doing. Technically, the workshop functioned in part as a store, and customers could come at any time. The difference between our forge and a regular shop was that we could get by with just one customer or so a month. But, if we hadn’t been able to wholesale our goods at Camilo’s, our business would’ve probably collapsed in a heartbeat due to our feeble trickle of customers. That being said, certain circumstances prevented us from moving to a location that customers could visit with ease.

“All right, shall we get started?” I asked.

Everyone agreed and moved to their stations, and thus, we began our work.

Starting today, I would be devoting all my time to making spears. I would be making four copies of the same design, and all four had to be custom model quality. There was nothing for it but to get fired up and begin.

I searched through our reserves of plate metal for a few that were well-made and set them aside. I could’ve had the others pour some high-quality plate before I started forging, but I felt it better not to rely entirely on that.

The first step was to forge the spear tips. As long as they were up to standard, the rest of the work would be nothing to worry about. Of course, the spear’s haft affected the overall effectiveness as a weapon. Whether the staff could

withstand a deliberate attack was one thing, but at the minimum, it should be durable enough to not snap like a twig when stabbing an enemy.

But regardless, with a well-made tip, the spear would be at least minimally useful as a weapon—that was where I focused my efforts for the time being.

I took one billet (a semifinished steel plate ready for forging) and slid it into the firebed to heat. In the red, yellow, and occasionally white flames, the temperature of the metal increased and the metal itself started to emit a red glow.

When my instincts told me, “*Now!*” I took the billet out and transferred it to the anvil. With my magic-imbued hammer, I pounded it into shape. The rhythm was different than the one produced when smoothing out metal plates, and the musical sound resounded throughout the forge.

Tips of spears were made to pierce—they could be flat and triangular or shaped like a pyramid. However, this time, I wanted to design something that could be used for slicing to some extent—I decided on a long, tapered tip shaped like a bamboo leaf. In other words, the spear tip would resemble a double-edged shortsword.

The cross section would be a rough diamond shape, but I planned to make the surface of the spear tip slightly concave, except for its bladed edges and the socket where the staff would be inserted. With long-shafted weapons, if one end was heavy, more strength would be needed to hold it up from the other end. The principle could be easily tested by hanging something—anything would do—on one end of a laundry pole and trying to lift the pole up from the opposite end.

In order for the spear to be viable as a slicing weapon, the wielder would need to be able to twirl it around, at least to some degree. If the tip was too heavy, the spear would be difficult to swing. I wanted to decrease its overall weight however I could.

By making the surface of the tip concave, I would not only decrease the weight but also save on raw materials. That second reason was a bit of an afterthought, or rather, the cost of materials wasn’t really a concern for us one way or another.

I carefully inspected the steel, observing its temperature and pinpointing spots to hammer on its surface. I put the appropriate amount of power behind each of my strikes, moving to where my instincts directed me. *Right there. Just like that.*

I owed my achievements to my cheats, but recently, the feeling that the weapons I made were not my own had become slightly diluted. Before, I'd felt like my cheats had overseen every little detail. But now my body seemed to be gradually adapting to the techniques. I would be grateful if that were the case.

However, one thing hadn't changed—I still could not explain the forging process using words. Instead, I worked purely on instinct. If only I knew what to say, I would be able to better teach Rike. *Sorry, Rike.*

Speaking of the dwarf, she had come up beside me to watch the work in progress, mumbling the occasional, "Oho!" and "I see." It was a relief that she seemed to be learning something from me after all.

Then, she made a questioning sound. "Hmmm."

"Something the matter?" I asked. "Be honest."

"You're making these spears for slicing as well as thrusting, right?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you going to wrap the soft steel with hard steel the way you did for the katana?"

"Aaah..."

There were Japanese spears that were made using the same technique as katanas. I had seen a few notable ones in my previous world. Many of them had beautiful *hamon* patterns on their edges.

The commission had been for four identical spears—that'd been the only requirement. They hadn't asked me to forge spears that would be appropriate to sell. I had assumed that was because a trained eye would easily be able to tell how high-quality the custom models were. In any case, that meant one thing: there shouldn't be any problem even if I made the spear tips with unconventional (according to the norms around here) techniques.

“All right, let’s go with your suggestion, Rike,” I concluded. “It’ll take time, but three days should still be plenty.”

“I didn’t mean any inconvenience, Boss.”

“No, it’s fine. Your input is a great help to me.” The words of thanks might have sounded slightly awkward coming from me, but I showed my appreciation by ruffling her hair.

I got straight to work on Rike’s plan. I’d made the katana for the demon Nilda using a technique called *kobuse*, which involved sandwiching a soft steel core with a hard shell in a U-shape. This time, since the tip was a tapered diamond shape, I would be laminating the four sides of the core with separate pieces of hard steel in a process called *shihozume*.

In reality, the strength and flexibility of steel was affected by a variety of factors such as the carbon composition and molecular structure. However, with me wielding the hammer (and a layer of magic), the result usually turned out durable enough.

If that was all I did, then the spear tips might not bend or break—they would be flexible and durable like a katana. However, the spears might feel slightly off when swung, like the metal was minutely warped or maybe as if the weapon was resisting the swing.

That was why I decided to adjust the hardness of the metal by controlling how much magic I weaved into it. Maybe I was just overthinking things. The outer layer of steel would probably be extremely hard either way.

I reheated the steel billet that I’d already started shaping and then hammered it back into a rectangular plate. It was already imbued with magic, but I wove even more magic into it so I could use it to laminate the soft core. Then, I prepared two more billets and filled them to their capacity with magic. I cut one in half vertically, thus forming the four plates to cover the core’s sides.

Next, I had to make the rectangular bar that would form the center of the spear. The core would be soft and flexible, so I only had to heat it and hammer it into shape.

“All that’s left is to put everything together,” I mumbled. “But...”

The sun had already started to set. The plate production team had finished up early and gone outside to spar (and tend to Krul and Lucy). Even in the workshop, we could hear the rhythmic clacking of wooden weapons striking each other, a melody that was accompanied by Krul's chirrups and Lucy's barks of glee.

"I'll work until the point where I need to leave the metal to harden," I decided.

"Are you sure?" Rike asked.

We were the only two remaining inside the forge.

"At this pace, I'll be able to make the deadline even if I leave some of the work for tomorrow. And this is an awkward stage to stop at."

"It is, isn't it?"

I had a vague recollection of the hours spent in my previous life doing unpaid overtime. Even if I enjoyed the work, overwork was still a bad thing. Well, at least I was able to delegate some of this work to tomorrow.

So, with that squared away, I dove back into the project. First, I heated the outer layers and the core in the firebed together—whooshing wind stoked the flames. I had already banked the fire in the forge, so the sound of the wind was louder than usual.

Unlike when folding steel, I didn't use any adhesive to stick the layers together because the adhesive would have remained between the outer layer and the core. Instead, I planned to heat the core and laminate to the same temperature, which would enable me to weld them together by hammering.

"Here we go," I said as I transferred the white-hot steel to the anvil.

Normally, it was impossible to fuse metal together without leaving a visible join, but if I dialed up my god-given skills to the max, I could weld steel together seamlessly. If my works were left for future generations to find, they would likely be classified as out-of-place artifacts. I was curious about what kind of theories people a millennium from now would come up with to explain them. But of course, I had no way of knowing.

Filled with a mixture of wistfulness and excitement, I continued focusing all my attention on my hammer.

I struck the steel steadily and rhythmically, heated it when it cooled, and then returned to the anvil to start the cycle anew. After repeating the same steps several times over, I finally managed to produce a flat, uniform, steel billet.

“This looks about right,” I remarked.

“You’re as fast as usual, Boss.”

“Well, I have an intuitive sense of where best to hammer the steel.”

I wasn’t lying, but “intuitive” was the key word here. In other words, I didn’t know anything more than what my intuition provided me with.

But Rike had her eyes set on what I could do—however it was that I did it—as her goal. “I must hurry and catch up to you,” she declared fervently.

After our chores the next morning, I lit the forge and firebed.

“Down to business,” I declared with a smile, pumping myself up for the day ahead.

Today, I would shape the rectangular billet—with its soft inner core and four walls of hard steel—into a proper tip for a spear. I had to finish all four spears in the next two days. Considering that the spears would need shafts and end caps too, I wanted to forge all the tips by the end of the day.

I slid the hardened steel bar that was yesterday’s output into the firebed. It took longer to heat now that the core had been laminated. Even if the outside layer was soft, the steel would be unworkable until the core was heated through too. Not even I could manipulate cold, hard metal.

Once the core was malleable, I removed the metal block from the fire and began to shape it. The end of the billet that would become the point of the spear was actually not yet covered by hard steel. As I hammered the four sides, that metal would extend to cover the end. It goes without saying that I’d made the four outer layer sections a bit thicker to accommodate that process.

Heating. Hammering. I worked the small bar over and over again. Of course, I

poured my full concentration and energy into shaping the spear tip. At the same time, I continued weaving in magic from the surroundings. I thinned and sharpened the pointed end while gradually increasing the thickness of the middle. I also made the faces concave like a gutter to strike a balance between durability and weight.

Rather than making a straightforward socket for the shaft to slot into, I experimented with shaping the end into a tang like the ones found on katanas—this could then be inserted into the staff to secure the two pieces together.

The overall shape of the tip looked like two katanas (with no curves) stuck together back-to-back. If I were to apply *yakiba-tsuchi* (a substance used to control how fast each part of the blade cooled) and quench the tip, a *hamon* pattern would appear along the edges. However, there'd be no way to recreate the exact same pattern three more times for identical spears.

Or so I want to say...but that impossible-sounding feat might not be so impossible for me. However, since I couldn't be one hundred percent sure I could make four exact replicas that way, I decided to quench as usual—just like a knife or sword. No *hamon* this time.

When the spear tip was hot enough to be quenched, I dunked it into a barrel filled with water. The hissing sound had become familiar to my ears in a way, and it filled the workshop. I waited for a short while and then drew the tip out once it had cooled sufficiently. As I ran it over the flames of the firebed to temper, I inspected my handiwork.

The spear tip was a dark, dull gray, but it had turned out well. A light polish would reveal the shining silver surface underneath. I sharpened it with a whetstone, paying especially close attention to the point since the spear would be primarily used for stabbing.

The *schlip* of the metal sliding against the whetstone joined the symphony of sounds coming from the plate production squad—it created a different soundscape from the usual “hammer striking metal on the anvil” composition.

“Aaah, so that's how spear tips are made,” Anne remarked. Apparently, she'd been peeking at me while I worked. Even so, she hadn't neglected the quality of her own work. How dexterous.

“Yes. Well, that’s how Boss chose to make it, but there are other ways as well.” The explanation rushed out of Rike in a fast stream. The way she got overly excited at times was proof that she was a blacksmith through and through.

Yup, that was the reason. That was what I chose to believe.

While Rike ran through her spiel, I quickly cut an appropriately sized length of wood with my knife to form a makeshift shaft. Then, I carved a slot into one end where I inserted the tang of the spear tip.

I had made sure to open a hole in the tang—like the ones used for rivets—and I secured the tip to the shaft by driving a nail through that hole. I finished off the prototype by wrapping a strip of leather around the area where the two pieces met.

“Helen!” I called. “Come here!”

She lowered the piece of cloth covering the bottom half of her face. “What is it?”

“Can you give me a hand?”

Helen looked at Samya, who nodded back.

“Sure,” Helen agreed.

“I want you to test this out for me.”

“Here? Outside?”

I tossed her the spear, and she deftly caught it. “Outside, of course. Sorry to interrupt you while you’re in the middle of something.”

“Small price to get my hands on one of your new works, Eizo.” She rolled her free shoulder as she headed outside.

I followed behind her, anticipation rising. Not only was this a chance to verify how the spear had turned out, but I’d also get to see Helen’s skills as a spearwoman. Long story short, the quality check finished in a flash. I was able to see that the spear was up to par, and Helen’s moves had been impressive to behold.

The one thing I hadn't bargained for, so to speak, was Krul and Lucy coming out to cheer Helen on. Afterward, Diana and the others said they wanted to play with the kids for a little longer, so I left them to it and returned to the workshop.

The others returned not long after I did. As they filed in, I asked, "You're back already?"

"Yeah, the kids seemed satisfied," Diana told me. "They went back to the hut after drinking some water."

"I see."

"They had their fill of playing."

According to Mama Diana and Bis Sis Rike (that was how I imagined Krul and Lucy thought of them), the little ones retired straight away after running around with everyone. Like Diana had said, maybe they'd been all played out.

"Besides that, Lucy is shooting up like a weed," Helen said offhandedly. "She should be strong enough to hunt down a fawn at least, don't you think? She probably knows not to bite us hard because Krul has been teaching her properly."

Lidy and I exchanged a look. Lucy wasn't a regular wolf. She had been driven out of her pack because she'd been corrupted by magic, but that was something we'd kept a secret from Anne so far.

The person (or should I say wolf?) in question wasn't aware that she was special, so we'd been able to pass her off as a perfectly average cute wolf pup so far.

"Must be because of, *you know*," Lidy answered obliquely so that Anne wouldn't understand.

"Yeah, *that*, right?" Helen said.

Even after we were no longer able to pretend that Lucy was a friendly li'l pup, I planned to persist with the story that she was just a—slightly special—forest wolf.

Come to think of it, how should a domesticated magical beast be handled in the first place? Needless to say, the laws in this world weren't exactly all-encompassing. The military could be deployed to exterminate monsters, but such an action probably wouldn't happen in this case. However, it would be problematic if there were a law that sentenced people harboring magical beasts to death.

Maybe I should ask Marius when I go to the capital.

My mind was full of worries about the path ahead. I scratched my head and then returned to work.

The next step was making the two remaining steel cores. The process was now familiar, so they didn't take long to complete.

I only had time left in the day to make the pieces for the outer layers. The task was time-consuming because of the amount I needed to make—three tips times four sides equaled twelve billets—but I managed to finish before the end of the day.

The next morning, Samya and the others went hunting, taking Anne along with them. This was the last chance for Anne to go on an outing with them. Only she and I would be making the trip to the capital, and after that, she would be going straight home to the empire.

I had my hands full with the spear commission, but I'd thought it would be nice for the others to go on a picnic. However, when I suggested it, I was told, "It feels wrong to be playing around when there are people at home working hard." The group was determined to hunt and only hunt.

Personally, I didn't care whether they caught anything or not. I just hoped they would be able to relax and have fun.

Rike and I saw the hunters off. They took Krul and Lucy with them in lieu of a walk.

"Come back safe," I said.

"Be home soon!" they chorused. Anne joined in too, waving cheerfully.

I realized that this was likely the last time I would hear those words from her. The moment certainly left an impression on me.

Regardless, I got down to business. First, I laminated the steel cores with the pieces I'd forged for the outer layers. It was impossible to weld all four sides in one go, but I was efficient enough to multitask. With my speed, I could weld one side while heating up the next one, all without worrying that the metal I left in the firebed would grow too hot.

Even so, I couldn't claim all the credit—I had the magical bellows to thank as well.

By the time I finished laminating two of the cores, it was lunchtime. I reheated the soup from breakfast, throwing in some extra meat and vegetables. Rike and I chatted as we ate.

"Your speed is incredible today, Boss," Rike said.

"I've gotten used to the process, that's all."

"I suppose there aren't many cases where we've had to make exact duplicates."

"It takes effort, so I'd rather not if I don't have to," I said. "Granted, forging identical copies probably wouldn't take so long if I wasn't contending with two different types of steels for the core and outer layer."

"I see. But then they wouldn't be any different from your previous works."

"Can't deny that."

There were advantages to making spears the way we usually did. Spears that matched the common style of the kingdom would sell better than northern-style ones.

"If we got another request for a northern spear, even for an elite or common model, I'd have to think long and hard about whether to take it on," I admitted.

"There don't seem to be many incentives to accept such a job," agreed Rike. Perhaps it was because of her dwarven background, but she was strict when it came to these kinds of decisions. Or was I just too lax?

"A handsome prize goes hand in hand with handsome compensation. That's

courtesy owed to the art and the artist.” Such was the ideology Rike followed. I fundamentally had no objections to such a belief, but since I leaned heavily on my cheats, I was prone to wave solid numbers away in favor of, “Anything is fine.” That was an instinct I should try to unlearn.

After lunch, I quickly tidied up the kitchen before returning to work. I had to finish before the end of the day.

Heat the steel. Hammer it out. Adjust the shape.

To speed up the process, I hammered one piece of steel as the next one was already warming up slowly in the firebed.

“Good. I’m done forging the tips,” I declared with a glance out the window.

There should be enough time left in the day for me to make the butt caps and staves. In the worst-case scenario, I could always put the spears together when we were on the road tomorrow.

The metal for the caps should be hard and durable. I decided to stick to a simple design since there didn’t seem to be much point in ornamenting the spears. I relied on my abilities to make four identical caps—plain steel coverings with sockets.

I selected solid-looking wood pieces from our stash in the garden and made four shafts, using the one I’d made for the prototype as a reference.

I might as well put one together.

Just like when I’d made the prototype, I slotted the tip into the staff, secured the two pieces with rivets, and wrapped a strip of leather over the top. I simply nailed the butt cap to the other side. It wasn’t very sophisticated, but the spears weren’t going to need repairing often.

Thus, I completed spear number one.

“I should probably test it out,” I muttered.

“Just in case?” Rike asked.

“Mmhmm.”

I could try the spear myself, but I would rather ask Helen to do it. Just as I was

thinking that, the wooden clackers in the workshop clapped together. The clackers on this side of the cabin moved in reaction to the front door in the living room. The hunters were back.

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll get Helen to help.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Rike agreed.

I picked up the finished spear and went to greet the others. “Welcome home,” I said, walking into the living room.

Five instances of “I’m home!” came flying back at me. After tomorrow, the number of replies would decrease by one. Considering Anne’s title, I doubted I would have another chance to talk with her freely going forward.

The thought sent a pang of loneliness through me...but after all, life was composed of a series of precious encounters.

“Hey, Helen,” I called out, carrying the spear in one hand. “Sorry to ask right when you’ve just gotten back, but can you help me with something?”

Helen picked up on my intentions immediately. “Sure. You’re done?”

“Yeah.”

“No problem. Looking forward to it!” she said enthusiastically.

“Then let’s go outside.”

“All right.”

So we went out. Just like when we’d tested the prototype, I set up a log. Rike brought out a steel plate, knowing what I wanted without me having to ask. I secured the plate to the log.

“Sorry for the trouble. Thanks,” I told Rike.

“Not at all,” she said, playing it cool. On the surface, she was projecting the indifference of an apprentice helping out their master, but the sparkle in her eyes gave her away. She was simply eager to see what was going to happen.

Well, there was nothing wrong with that. That appetite for knowledge was an important nutrient to fuel growth...at least, that was my opinion.

Helen spun the spear I’d handed her in broad arcs. In her hands, the weapon

looked as light as a feather, but when I'd lifted it, I had noticed the heft. Was it technique or physical strength that allowed her to swing it around as if the spear were nothing more than a hollow drying rod?

"Hah—!" With a grunt, she sliced toward the metal set into the wood, her movements fluid and light. The metal split from top to bottom and fell apart with a quiet *thunk*. Otherwise, the attack had been soundless.

"Beautiful," I complimented.

The sound of our claps rang throughout the clearing, which was silent but for the rush of the wind.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared that only the metal had been cut. There wasn't a single scratch on the log. It was the clean work of a weapon that readily responded to Helen's skills and delicate handling. I didn't doubt Helen's capabilities, but had she been wielding a lesser weapon, she would have either left a mark on the log or failed to cut the metal entirely.

"It feels like a completely different weapon now that you've adjusted the balance!" she exclaimed.

"Aren't you exaggerating?"

"Not at all," she replied as she shifted her grip to the middle of the shaft and spun it around, evaluating the balance.

"I'm happy to have made something worthwhile."

"That it is. I'd want it for myself if that were on the table."

"It's yours at any time," I said amiably, "for the low, low price of fifteen gold."

"*Tsk*," Helen clicked her tongue.

All seven of us laughed.

"Shall we eat?" I suggested. "Go wash up."

The others agreed. Krul and Lucy added their approval too. So, we split up to complete our individual tasks.

Tonight was Anne's final meal at Forge Eizo. She and I would have to leave first thing in the morning without eating and take our breakfast on the go.

Therefore, I pulled out all the stops, serving both boar and venison with a variety of sauces. I even prepared a glaze made with root vegetables.

Before we dug in, I said to Anne, “This is as much of a feast as we can offer, though it might be too simple for your palate.”

Anne waved away my words. “Please, not at all. We rarely eat anything this extravagant in the palace either!”

Though I didn’t know if she was just being polite, I would be gratified if she at least enjoyed the meal. I had poured cups of wine for everyone as well, with the exception of Rike, who was served her usual brandy. Everyone picked up their cups and rose to their feet.

I cleared my throat and said, “Here’s to the successful completion of the spears and to Anne’s safe return home!”

All seven of us shouted, “Cheers!”

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“Will you return to your official duties once you’re back in the empire?” Diana asked Anne.

“Yes, I think so,” she replied. “However, as you might already be aware, I am not all that important to the running of the country in the grand scheme of things, so my responsibilities are less than you all may be imagining.”

After Anne finished her wine, Rike gave her a sip of brandy. Apparently, she was quite taken with it. After three cups, Anne was in a merry mood. Her face was flushed, but her speech was clear. She might not have been able to compete with Rike (who could down four or five drinks and be completely fine), but she was not weak against alcohol by any means.

She’d feel the consequences tomorrow if she continued drinking, but I thought I understood where she was coming from—she might not have many opportunities like this in the future. I restrained myself though since I was susceptible to alcohol. I was still sipping on my first glass of wine as I listened to the others talk.

Afterward, Anne fell asleep at the table and had to be carried back to her

room by Samya and Helen. Nonetheless, it was strangely charming.

The next morning, I asked, “Do you have a headache or anything?”

“No. I don’t get hangovers even when I drink so much I fall asleep,” she answered.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The horse-drawn cart we would be traveling on today was sure to be shaky. Riding a rocking cart with a hangover was a surefire recipe for nausea. And she was sure to be dragged into something upon arriving at the capital, so she couldn’t afford to be groggy.

I quickly whipped up breakfast for the others and prepared a to-go meal for me and Anne—sandwich slices of warm salt-cured jerky between flatbread.

It was time to prepare for the journey ahead. Though, since I wasn’t going to be smithing in the capital, all I needed to bring along was *Diaphanous Ice* and the four commissioned spears.

In the meantime, Anne packed up her belongings. When she emerged, she had her bag and her greatsword strapped to her back—she looked the same as she had on the day she’d originally planned to go home. However, today, she was exuding a slightly more commanding aura. Perhaps the extra intimidation factor was the result of those hunting trips she’d gone on with the others.

At the door, I told everyone, “We’re off!”

“Have a safe trip,” they replied.

“Everyone, I’ve been in your care. I will never forget the days I spent with you all here. Thank you,” Anne said, offering a bow.

In that moment, she wasn’t the seventh princess of the empire. Had she been acting in her official capacity, she wouldn’t have been able to bow to the family; it wouldn’t have been permissible for her to be in the debt of commoners (with the exception of one daughter of a count).

The others hugged Anne or shook her hand, reluctant to say farewell.

Finally, Anne and I set off for the forest entrance. I’d always kept that last

“what if” in the back of my head until now, but there was absolutely no merit to killing me at this point. Anne would have known that too.

Though, I couldn't deny that my feelings might've been blinding my judgment.

The forest was indifferent to my internal struggle. Our surroundings were lit with warm sunlight filtering through the canopy, and a gentle breeze rustled past.

“It would've been nice to have a picnic on a beautiful day like this,” I commented.

“I was looking forward to it too. That is my sole regret,” Anne replied in a quiet voice. She seemed to be disappointed from the bottom of her heart.

I even had a fleeting thought: *If only the situation had taken a smidge longer to resolve itself...* However, that would've delayed Anne's return, which was an undesirable outcome. The timing just hadn't been right. There was nothing more to say.

“We couldn't go on a picnic, but I've prepared something similar for our breakfast today. Please wait a little longer,” I said.

“I look forward to it.”

Our journey to the forest border was accompanied by distant birdsong. We reached the entrance and set down our luggage in some shrubs that were hidden away from the road. I gestured for Anne to sit.

I took the sandwiches out of my bag and passed one to Anne. “Here.”

“Thank you. Are you used to taking meals like this, Eizo?”

I smiled wryly. “Of course not.” I hadn't done anything of the sort in my previous world either. “But I have eaten outdoors once before, perched in the boughs of a tree,” I admitted.

“That's amazing! Like a ranger!”

“No, nothing so impressive as that...”

In truth, at the time, I *had* been trying to foil a scheme to usurp the control of the county, so I had been something of a spy or ranger. Needless to say, I'd kept

all that a secret from Anne.

That made me wonder though—were there rangers in the empire?

I asked Anne offhandedly, to which she replied, “Aren’t there rangers in the kingdom as well?” It was a circuitous answer, but an answer nonetheless, and it satisfied my curiosity.

The revolution drama over in the empire had been a well-orchestrated sham, but if an uprising were actually to occur, the empire’s spies and rangers would be very busy.

“I wish we could’ve eaten somewhere with a better view,” I said.

“Not at all—this is perfect. The sandwich is delicious.” A smile lit up Anne’s face. I detected no trace of falsity at all. I would be happy if the meal had provided her with even a single moment’s respite.

After we finished eating, I peeked out at the road. A short time passed, and then a horse-drawn cart drew near us. There was a familiar face at the reins.

“They’re here,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“All right.”

We gathered our belongings and walked up to the cart that would take us to the capital—the cart that carried the fates of Anne, me, and my family.

Chapter 5: Peace Talks behind Closed Doors

“Hey! Morning!” I called, strolling up to the cart.

Camilo peered out from the back. “G’morning, Eizo.”

“Good morning, Master Eizo,” greeted the head clerk who was at the reins.

Camilo helped me and Anne load everything into the back. The spears were cumbersome because they were long, and Anne’s sword was just plain bulky, but otherwise we had brought little. Everything was squared away in no time.

Once Camilo signaled to the clerk, we started moving forward. We rode fast, but the cart had a suspension system installed, so the motion was smooth.

I glanced at Anne. She appeared to have noticed there was something different about the cart and was staring at me with a gleam in her eye. I averted my gaze quickly, but well, it looked like the jig was up.

This technology could, of course, be put toward military purposes. With suspensions, carts could travel on poorly maintained roads without slowing down (to an extent), which affected how fast a military expedition could progress. The difference in speed might seem minuscule, but the impact would nonetheless be large.

From the conversations I’d had with Anne, and from what I’d observed while living with her, I suspected that she was more involved in military affairs than political ones. There was no way she hadn’t noticed the suspensions.

It was highly likely that we’d be walking into some kind of negotiation today. In theory, I would be able to count on Camilo, the margrave, and Marius to handle the situation. They would know what to anticipate, assuming I wasn’t overestimating them.

Overall, the journey to the capital was uneventful, and we spoke little. Since there was a person of high rank from a rival nation riding with us, it would’ve been improper to even make small talk about happenings around the kingdom.

Anne was in the same position—she couldn't casually chat with us about current events in the empire either (be that as it may, the whole affair with the uprising was behind us).

So, we passed the time with idle chatter like, "Nice weather today," and remarks about the scenery. Otherwise, we remained silent. A bandit ambush would've at least given us something to talk about.

We maintained our pace the entire way, so we reached the capital relatively early. Travelers thronged around the gate, but when the head clerk flashed a pass at the guard, we were given priority entrance. Envious stares stabbed at us from all directions. I shrunk back in my seat instinctively.

"Won't it cause trouble for us to receive such obvious favorable treatment?" I asked.

"Yes. It would be best for us to blend in, but if we did, who knows when we'd be able to enter? Waiting too long would present problems as well. There are important people from the empire waiting for our arrival."

"Oh, I understand."

That's right. We were trying to find a quiet resolution and keep the mess between the two nations hush-hush. This meant that, in addition to influential representatives from the kingdom like the margrave and Marius, there would be high-ranking delegates sent from the empire.

Anne's presence had been requested, so the delegate was likely someone Anne could trust, or at least someone she knew. Maybe it was even someone from the imperial family. Regardless, it wasn't anyone we could afford to keep waiting. If we were to dawdle...well, the delay might intensify their misgivings about the current incident, causing distrust to pile up quietly but surely like snow.

The streets of the capital were just as crowded as the gate had been. People of all races, genders, and ages bustled about on their way to accomplish whatever they'd set out to do.

Looking at the crowd, Anne muttered, "The kingdom's capital is busy as well."

"Is the empire like this too?" I asked.

“Yes,” she replied, “though at the moment, the streets are emptier than usual. But with the way His Majesty is, people of all races, not just humans, can live peacefully and thrive in the city. Normally, there are probably twice as many people in the empire’s capital as there are here.”

Anne had said previously that the emperor’s consorts were of all different races, which meant that his children, including Anne, were also diverse too. *Assuming that his aims are intentional, his people must regard him highly for his choices,*

Our cart cut through the ocean of people like a boat cresting the waves of troubled waters, and nostalgia struck me. As we proceeded deeper into the city, the crowd began to thin. We soon passed through the inner walls and arrived at an impressive residence—the margrave’s villa.

Come to think of it, this is my first time coming back here since the ruckus over the Eimoor family’s succession.

“We’ve arrived,” the clerk announced. He gestured for us to disembark.

Anne and I didn’t forget to unload our belongings. A familiar-looking servant approached us the instant we were done, and I thought he must’ve been watching and waiting from the sidelines. “Welcome. Right this way,” said the servant. He began leading us into the estate, and we rushed after him.

We walked down a sunny hallway—the plush carpeting was an unfamiliar feeling beneath my feet. If we had been at the estate for a casual chat, I would’ve liked to savor the sensations and scenery, but, at the moment, everything was tinged by ominousness.

So, we simply made our way through the building, which was quite large for a secondary residence. We were quickly shown into a room—a large table was situated in the center of the space, and several people were already sitting around it.

Two of them were familiar: the margrave and Marius. They were conversing with a third person, and their demeanors seemed somewhat stiff and ill at ease.

The stranger looked to be your average, graying old man, but despite his appearance, he had an impressive aura about him. The contrast made me want

to chuckle, but I fiercely smothered that instinct. I wondered who he was, and I was about to introduce myself, but suddenly, the answer to my query came from an unexpected source.

“Father!”

That exclamation had come from Anne. In other words, the mysterious figure was none other than His Imperial Majesty.

The ruler of the empire had come to the kingdom.

I peered at the emperor and noticed that his clothing was simple in design but well-made. To use an (extreme) example from my previous world, the garments were like T-shirts that looked plain at first glance but were actually made from organic silk. His clothing struck an uncanny balance—insiders would *know*, and people who weren’t privy would think nothing of it.

When I realized who he was, I quickly began to kneel down, but the emperor stopped me with a wave of his hand. “There is no need for that here,” he said. “You are not one of my subjects, and it would be unbecoming of me to swan while wearing this outfit.” He laughed heartily.

I straightened, feeling a trickle of cold sweat slip down my spine. I’d honestly felt uncomfortable around people with power since my previous life.

“I’ve heard you’re a blacksmith who plies his trade in the Black Forest,” remarked the emperor. “I wondered what kind of brute you’d be. Though your presentation might leave something to be desired, you seem to be a composed man.”

Could’ve done without the comment about my appearance, but I can take his words overall as a compliment, right?

“Your generosity is wasted on me. I am but a humble blacksmith. My name is Eizo.” I didn’t kneel, but I bowed deeply as per the northern customs.

“I am the ruler of the empire, Alexei Safin Andreyev Weisner.”

He did not question the bow, so he was likely familiar with northern tradition to some extent. I was glad I didn’t have to offer up my family name.

Green eyes stared out of his chiseled face, and he assessed me with a sharp

gaze. One wrong word and the jig would be up. *Best to avoid lying if I can.*

Suddenly, the man beside me spoke up. “My name is Camilo.”

“Ah,” the emperor replied. “Thank you for your help this time around. You can leave the other matter to me.”

The exchange made me wonder if Camilo had a hand in organizing the emperor’s entry into the kingdom. *Hmm, it would’ve stood out too much if the margrave or Marius had sent their own men. The other matter must be about compensation. Maybe...permission to sell in the empire?*

I had assumed that Camilo intended to tie himself to the heart of the kingdom’s politics, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. Perhaps he was even acting as a double agent.

The emperor then turned to Anne. “So, Annemarie.” His words were laden with an unasked question.

Anne immediately shook her head.

Seeing her response, the emperor laughed again. “Well, that’s to be expected. It’s easy to tell, now that I’ve seen him in person. He does not look like he has an appetite for such things. The reward I’d prepared wasn’t suitable.”

“I apologize. I have no excuse,” Anne said.

“It’s fine. I didn’t think it through. Sorry about that.” He made a gesture of appreciation.

Their conversation wasn’t that of a parent and child, but rather, that of an emperor and a princess. Was this how they always interacted? *How lonely.* However, I wasn’t about to stick my nose into another family’s affairs, much less the affairs of another nation’s upper class (the highest of all classes, at that).

After that exchange, we were urged to sit, so sit we did. Representatives of the kingdom lined up along one side of the long table facing the delegates from the empire. Of course, Anne sat down on the empire’s side.

“Now then, shall we begin?” Marius asked.

With that one line, the relaxed atmosphere dissolved. Were a pin to drop on

the carpet, the sound would surely be swallowed up by the tension.

“First, let’s discuss the plan.”

So began the process of wrapping up the incident once and for all.

“Let me first confirm,” Marius began. “The ones who conspired to attack Her Imperial Highness were a baron from the kingdom and a count from the empire. Is that correct?”

“Yes. That is the information we have uncovered in the kingdom,” stated the margrave.

“That aligns with the empire’s findings as well.” A slim-faced man sitting next to the emperor answered on behalf of the delegation. He must have been high-ranking to have been included in the conference. Granted, most everyone here was a prominent member of their nation’s leadership—only Camilo and I were ranked too low for the current gathering.

“In that case, may we present the following.”

At Marius’s signal, the door opened, and a servant stepped inside. He was carrying two of my spears. I felt a strong killing intent radiating from the empire’s side. It wasn’t coming from the slender man, but rather, from the woman on the emperor’s other side. She was likely a guard. Putting together all the information I had, I surmised that she was likely one of Anne’s many “mothers” or a candidate for the position.

Seeming unbothered by the threat emanating from the woman, the servant placed the spears on the table. He had guts. To think that the margrave employed a servant who could face up to such intimidation... Were Miss Frederica here, she might’ve fainted on the spot.

The killing air disappeared the moment the servant exited. I heard Camilo let out a quiet sigh next to me.

The emperor nodded toward the spears, and the woman next to him picked one up. She gave it a good hard look. I wasn’t seriously worried that she would turn it on us, but I subtly angled myself so I could kick Marius out of the way just in case.

However, it appeared that I hadn't been subtle enough. The woman glanced at me.

Busted.

I could still play dumb—after all, I hadn't done anything *too* obvious—but that might only invite future trouble. My body felt chilled to the core. Soon, the woman sniffed and returned her attention to her evaluation.

After a while, she bundled the two spears together and put them behind her. "Fine," she said softly. It appeared that the transaction was complete.

I had forged four spears, but the empire was only taking possession of two. Did that mean the kingdom would be using the other two?

"Afterward, you are free to do with them as you please," Marius said.

The emperor nodded. "All right."

Next to the emperor, the thin man opened his mouth to speak. "That should be all the components needed to carry out the plan."

"In my opinion, we needn't have gone to such lengths," the woman interrupted. "There was no need to travel here to pick up a couple of spears—no matter how high their quality—all to make two people disappear in the middle of a commotion."

The slim man had worn a placid expression this entire time, but now his face looked pained. My guess? The higher-ups had wanted to conceal the details from Camilo and me. I was sure Marius and the margrave had planned to do the same.

As if to confirm my suspicion, the margrave sighed deeply. "Well, now you know the situation. Remember the land I obtained? The count from the empire—the one responsible for the assassination attempt—is planning to launch an attack to take it back. We learned about the details from a spy. To counter, we're planning to send the treasonous baron from our kingdom to deal with it. Troops from both nations will be going along as well."

"And that's the aforementioned *confusion*?" I asked.

The margrave nodded firmly. "Neither of them are idiots. They'll likely be

taking along private soldiers as well and will be wearing solid armor. That's where your steel-piercing spears will come in."

"I see."

Most people in attendance today should have been familiar with my weapons' abilities. Marius and the margrave had personally seen them in action. Also, since the empire had sent Anne to our forge after finding Helen's swords, they were likely informed as well.

The woman was probably thinking, *Wouldn't a normal spear suffice for the job? Why should we have to jump through these hoops?* Her perspective was certainly understandable.

I decided to voice her concern. "But, if that's the case," I said, "wouldn't normal spears suffice?"

Carrying an ostentatious spear would be like openly declaring, "Look at me. I'm hiding a trick up my sleeve." That would defeat the point of the scheme.

"The purpose of wielding these particular spears is to ensure that agents on each side can identify one another."

"Aaah..." That made sense—the plan would be a wash if the assassins accidentally killed each other. The specially made spears were a prevention measure, an easy way to pick the agents out during battle.

However, if that was the extent of the plan, there would've been no need for me to be present during this meeting. Since I was merely a blacksmith, they could have shut me out, finished the discussion in private, paid me the gold, and sent me off with a *toodle-oo!* And, there certainly wouldn't be a need for the emperor himself to be present—not for such a simple task. The man with the slim face and the woman were the ones actually doing the talking. They could've come by themselves. The emperor being here meant that he was absent from his own nation for the entire day.

That led me to conclude one thing: there was a discussion topic on deck vital enough to warrant a day of an emperor's time.

As these thoughts were swirling through my head, the emperor turned to Anne, who was sitting beside him. "Oh, yes," he remarked offhandedly. "By the

way, Annemarie, you will be remaining in the kingdom.”

“I’m...staying?” Anne couldn’t hide her confusion. That was only natural. Just as she thought she could finally go home, she was informed that she would be staying. I narrowly managed to keep my own reaction off my face, though it took every ounce of effort.

There was no person in the empire who could overrule an order by the emperor, not even an imperial princess. In other words, His Imperial Majesty had journeyed all the way here in person for this very purpose.

Had Anne been of a lower social position, the emperor could have conveyed the decree by letter, but that would’ve been unacceptable when dealing with a princess. Or, perhaps, he had simply wanted to personally inform his daughter of the news.

“Indeed. Your continued presence is one of the terms for the reconciliation of our two nations,” the emperor intoned solemnly.

In short, Anne would continue to serve as a hostage of the kingdom. Anne seemed to accept the situation, but I wondered what she truly thought, deep down.

“May I speak?” I asked, intending to offer Anne a helping hand.

The slim-faced man started to stand, perhaps intending to rebuke me for my audacity, but the emperor stayed him with a wave.

“Fine. Speak.”

“With all due respect, may I ask how these terms were drawn? I’m afraid my education is humble, and I do not understand the reason Her Highness must remain in the kingdom.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed. “I see.” *As they say, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.*

Anne had bowed her head, so I couldn’t see her expression.

“Simply put, this situation was brought about by a certain *carelessness*, shall we say, on our side,” the emperor explained. “I would not voice this notion in public, but I know it to be true. Nothing would change if the kingdom reneged

on their part of the plan—at least, not from the outside. The battle over land would be seen as nothing more than a petty squabble.”

The emperor broke off. He paused, perhaps to see if there were any arguments or to make sure I was following. When he saw that no one was going to say anything, he continued.

“However, if we were to be the betrayers, the kingdom would inevitably lose the new land where your citizens have settled. Of course, if either the baron or the count survive, then that branching path may come to pass anyway, even if the empire doesn’t actively sabotage the plan. That’s something we want to avoid.”

“I see. I understand now.”

Anne’s status might’ve been slightly higher than the situation warranted, but there was no one else who could act as a hostage, especially not while keeping all of these events a secret. The empire couldn’t send anyone else without revealing all of this sensitive information. Therefore, Anne was the most logical choice—she would continue to represent the empire’s assurance that it would not betray the kingdom.

Next, the margrave opened his mouth to speak. “So, Eizo.”

I already had a sense of what he was going to say and why I had been included in this discussion. Resistance was futile, it seemed. Besides, I did agree with the reasoning.

“Concerning the kingdom’s housing of Her Imperial Highness, where do you think is the best place for her to stay?” asked the margrave.

My reply came instantly. “At my forge, perhaps.” No doubt about it. Dangerous wolves, bears, and boar roamed freely around our house, and the clearing surrounding the forge was protected by stranger-repelling magic.

Though it might’ve seemed as though folks dropped by the forge all the time, the location was actually known to only a few people. Anyone who wanted to ascertain the location had to be assessed, and these individuals needed to be of a certain caliber. The ones who darkened our doorstep were people who had cleared this criteria.

The margrave immediately confirmed my guess. “Exactly—at your forge. Can we request this of you?”

If I were to refuse, I could predict Anne’s fate—she would be handled with kid gloves and passed around from one place to another. I knew I was being too forgiving, considering that Anne was a potential foe, but I had made my decision.

“I understand. We will shelter her.”

“Good. We can provide you with some level of support,” stated the margrave. “Let us know if you are ever in need.”

“No. If we are to shelter her, we will refuse support from both sides. We will manage on our own resources,” I said firmly. I wanted to avoid being tied down under the guise of aid.

While evading the gaze of the smirking emperor, I resolved in my heart to put an end to any plans the empire might have to leash Anne.

“In that case, let us forgo talk of aid. We simply must recompense you for your work.” The margrave turned, and the servant who had brought in the spears came forward once more with a leather bag. “This is your payment in gold. Please accept it.”

“Compensation I will gladly receive,” I said.

Taking the heavy bag from the servant, I slipped it into a pocket. I didn’t check the number of pieces since I trusted that no one here would be so petty as to shortchange me. And, if they did attempt to cheat me, I was confident they knew what would happen.

“In that case, I believe my business here is finished,” I said. “If you would be so kind as to permit me to take my leave.”

“Yes, you may,” the emperor said. Both he and the margrave nodded magnanimously.

There was no point in remaining here any longer, and I couldn’t be sure what questions would come my way if I did stay.

“Excuse me.” I rose to my feet, intending to make my exit.

When Anne stood as well, I asked, “Will you not be staying, Your Imperial Highness?”

Once she came to live with us, she would be spending most of her time in either the forest or the city. There would be few chances for her to come to the capital and next to none to visit the empire. We might occasionally take trips for fun, but anything more official would be unlikely. And, even if we were to travel across the empire’s border, a mere blacksmith and his family would hardly be granted an audience with the royal family at the drop of a hat.

In other words, these were the last moments Anne would have with her family. Wasn’t it best to spend as long as possible together?

However, Anne refused. “No. I don’t have any reason to.” She looked at me, a spark of determination aglow in her eyes. Her gaze told me that the matter was decided and it would be rude to continue arguing. She had already made up her mind.

“Is that so? In that case, everyone, we bid you farewell.” I bowed deeply in the northern style. Anne did the same.

Before I exited the room, I whispered in Camilo’s ear, “I’m going to stop by Pops’s place. When you’re done here, let’s convene at the count’s residence,” to which he nodded and handed over a wooden token—the token of passage. I patted his shoulder lightly in thanks.

Right as I was about to step out the door, the emperor called out to me. “Wait.”

I turned. “What is it?”

“I’m counting on you,” he said.

“I will not let you down.”

Had he spoken just now as a parent...or as the emperor? Formality dictated that he shouldn’t have said anything to me as I was leaving, so I wanted to believe it was the former. In any case, I held not a single drop of malice toward Anne, and I certainly had no intention of mistreating her.

Meeting the emperor’s eyes, I nodded, and he nodded back. Anne and I then

left the room.

Once the door closed, I turned to her. "All right, how about some food?" I suggested, striving for a light tone. When your thoughts were a jumbled mess, a hearty meal was just the thing to clear things up. That...might've been just my perspective though.

"You said something about 'Pops's place?'" Anne asked as we followed a servant through the halls.

"Yes. An acquaintance of mine runs a restaurant here. His food is excellent."

"I look forward to it then."

Walking together like this, she seems no different from any other young lady of marriageable age...if you ignore the greatsword on her back, that is.

I regarded said sword for a moment. "Are you taking that with you?"

"Yes. It is somewhat large to be used for self-protection, but I thought it would make an effective bluff to deter petty criminals," she explained.

"I see."

"You're taking your sword as well, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's true."

Diaphanous Ice was hanging from my waist, and I definitely planned to bring it with me to visit Pops. The capital was relatively safe, but walking around completely unarmed with a girl would've made me feel restless. There was no telling when one would run into trouble.

Anne seemed determined to protect herself, and if that was her decision, then it was fine by me.

Thus, we two troublemakers (to anyone looking in from the outside) left the margrave's villa behind.

Chapter 6: Another Member of the Family

Anne and I strolled through the inner city, which was within the second layer of city walls. Standing out was unavoidable here: we were a man and woman wearing clothes that were entirely out of place. In addition, I was a northerner with a katana hanging from my leather belt and Anne was a half-giant, tall in stature, with an equally long double-handed sword strapped to her back.

This type of clothing didn't look right on Anne either. She was a princess. It was the same with Diana, who was the young lady of a comital family. Roughspun clothing didn't suit their beauty.

Perhaps the discrepancy was what led some people to gape at us without bothering to hide their curiosity. But no one called out to us, and no one seemed put off by our threatening weapons or our sheer incongruousness with the setting.

Neither Anne nor I spoke along the way, and we made our way to our destination in silence. Soon, we arrived at the familiar gate that marked the passage between the inner and outer city walls.

The guard on duty stared at us unabashedly, but that was part of his job. I took out the right of passage token from my pocket and showed it to him. He checked it over and gestured for us to go through. The two of us bowed in thanks and walked into the outer city.

A little ways past the gate, we emerged onto the main thoroughfare. Anne's eyes widened, and she gasped. "Oh, my."

As usual, the streets of the capital were jam-packed with people.

"It didn't look so busy when we rode through earlier, but walking on the streets...I'm realizing it's actually quite populous," Anne said.

"Yeah. It's also been a few hours since we arrived. More people will have come out since then," I explained.

"I see."

The lower vantage point likely made the city feel more crowded—this effect was enhanced by the simple fact that the number of pedestrians had actually increased since the morning. Anne seemed satisfied by the explanation and turned to look around at the passersby and merchant stalls.

Out on the main road, our outfits blended in more. However, the fact that we were a northern man and a woman with giant's blood, both armed, didn't change. We didn't have any hope of slipping under the radar entirely.

Our saving grace was that the outer city was more diverse, so there were few people who looked at us with blatantly rude gazes.

"This way," I said, ushering Anne forward.

It was best to avoid attracting attention as much as possible while there were still loose ends to be tied up.

Anne merely said, "All right," and followed behind me. I was briefly reminded of Lucy trailing my footsteps. The image brought a laugh to my lips, but I emphatically shoved it down.

Pops's shop wasn't far from the main street, and it wasn't long before we arrived. "This is it," I announced.

We stepped inside. There were few customers, perhaps since it wasn't rush hour yet. Pops's daughter spotted us when we entered and led us to a table. Anne and I removed our weapons and sat down.

She went into the back where the kitchen likely was, yelling, "Pops! The blacksmith's back again! He brought a pretty young lady with him! A new one!"

That...was highly misleading information she was screaming at the top of her lungs.

The response to the slander was instantaneous. "What?!" The bellow came nearly before she had finished speaking. "Eizo! You dog! What happened to your other wives?!"

"They're not my wives," I protested. "And let me just add, my companion here may be part of my family, but she isn't my wife either. The two of us are in the capital on business with the count, which we've finished. We came because

we're hungry and want something to eat."

"So you didn't toss out the other ladies?" Sandro asked.

"Do you think I'd do something like that?"

"Now that you mention it, I doubt you have it in you!" He laughed heartily.

Did he really think I'd swapped them out?

"Good. With that settled, get ready to eat until you're stuffed," he proclaimed. "I'll get the others to help out."

"Let me pay this time."

He ignored my words and instead shouted, "I'm primed and ready!" before marching back into the kitchen.

I grimaced and watched him go, wondering how to explain everything to Anne and mulling over what I should say about the future.

"I once accompanied a campaign to subjugate an outbreak of monsters. I traveled as part of the supply train. That's where I became acquainted with this restaurant's owner," I explained.

"The supply train?" she asked.

"Yeah. My job was to repair damaged weapons and armor."

"I see."

Could Anne not have much interest in logistics? Her low awareness may be because there hasn't been a war in this area in a long time that demanded such large-scale planning.

"His speech is a little rough, but his skills are unparalleled. If you like the meals I cook, I think you'll like his food too."

"Um," Anne mumbled, interrupting me. She was fidgeting restlessly.

For a moment, I wondered what she wanted to say, but then she made up her mind and opened her mouth to speak. "Everyone in the forge is part of your family, right?" she asked.

“Well...yes, they are,” I replied.

“Then, am I included as well?” She looked up at me through her lashes. A wrinkle formed between her brows.

Aaah.

I was supposed to be harboring her as a hostage, and that role was very different from what one usually deemed “family.”

However, technically speaking, Diana, Lidy, and even Helen were in similarly odd positions. I’d been entrusted with Diana’s care, Lidy had come to live with us because the Black Forest was close to the capital, and Helen was hiding until the dust settled.

But regardless of their circumstances, I treated them all as family. Besides, it would be uncomfortable for both Anne and the rest of us to live for an indeterminate amount of time as strangers.

After a moment of silence and me organizing my thoughts, I answered.

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Anne echoed, seeming relieved.

Just then, Pops’s daughter came over with our food and ale. Her loud “Here ya go!” drowned out Anne’s whispered, “Thank goodness.”

We dug into the scrumptious feast. After a bit, perhaps emboldened by the ale, Anne spoke with slightly slurred words. “So, we’re going to be family...” She seemed to be a poor drunk. Her behavior devolved this way whenever we drank at the cabin too.

“Right,” I prompted.

“I’m wondering about the level of formality we should use with each other,” she finished.

“I see.”

I agreed with her one hundred percent. Setting aside Rike, who was my apprentice, and Lidy, who was courteous by nature, the others all spoke with me casually. I didn’t go out of my way to put on airs either.

“Okay—no more mummary going forward,” I said, adopting the laid-back tone I used with all the others. “For either of us.”

This curry-esque stewed dish sure is delicious.

A flush rose to Anne’s cheeks—was that an effect of the alcohol too?—and she simply said, “Okay.” Then, she took another large swig from her pint.

“By the way, as you’ve seen, the work we do is standard for a forge...quality notwithstanding.”

“Can I help out?” she asked.

“Yeah, well...you don’t dislike physical labor?”

“Not at all.”

“Then we’ll have you try a bit of everything. Everyone in the family has plenty of muscle, with one exception, but wielding a blacksmith’s hammer is still tiring work.”

“By exception, you mean Lidy?”

“Yeah.”

Lidy was strong compared to the average person (at least, strong enough to keep pace with the hunters on their outings). However, she couldn’t hold a candle to Diana, who’d been training all this time, or Helen, who was perhaps the strongest warrior in the entire region.

And those two were human.

The gaps between Lidy and Samya (a beastfolk), and Lidy and Rike (a dwarf), were massive. The phrase “insurmountable wall” came to mind.

“I would love to have Lidy help with tasks she can use her brain for, but there’s hardly ever a need,” I said.

“Well, you do run a smithy.” Anne pointed out.

“Exactly. And I have no real desire to branch out.”

Lidy was with us in part as a magic consultant. However, in this world, there were rarely any requests for those kinds of services. Lidy had once said it herself: “People came to consult with us once in a blue moon.” Her services on

that front certainly weren't in high demand, and she wouldn't be able to put food on the table that way.

That was why, instead of the brainwork she specialized in, she was helping us with physical labor. It was a blessing that she seemed to have taken a shine to it.

"Once you're used to it, maybe I'll try and come up with something we can all make together. With you on the team, we definitely have enough people," I said.

"Ah...right," Anne replied hesitantly. "First, I have to get a hang of the basics."

"Just go at your own pace. When we don't have any active commissions, we're only required to forge the items our merchant partner buys from us."

My dream was to live an idle life forging what I wanted when I wanted. At the moment, I wasn't quite there yet, but I didn't see the need to work myself tirelessly to reach that goal.

Though...it feels like I haven't been allowed much of a rest. Maybe that's just my imagination. Mmhmm.

Anne chuckled softly. "I'm starting to get excited."

"Good," I replied, taking a hearty swig of ale.

I put a stop to Pops's rapid-fire barrage of dishes in a timely manner. If I hadn't pumped the brakes, he would have just kept going and going and going. When I said as much to his daughter, she flashed an apologetic smile. Apparently, that was a bad habit of his that surfaced when his acquaintances visited the restaurant.

Both Anne and I ate until we were stuffed, and we decided to give ourselves a little time to digest before leaving. There was still a biiit of time before the lunchtime rush hour, so Martin and Boris came out from the kitchen to chat. Pops had likely told them we were here.

We mostly told stories about the expedition; Anne listened with interest.

"You haven't been on any expeditions since then?" I asked.

"Nope, not one. Truth be told, there's little coin to be made on the supply

train,” Boris said. “Pops has known the Eimoor laddie—I mean, Count Eimoor—since His Highness was a boy, so we were hard-pressed to refuse last time around.”

“I see.”

As a kid, Marius had often used to sneak out beyond the walls to explore the outer city. Had Pops known him since then?

“But he made sure to give us something extra for our efforts. That man knows his stuff.”

“Oho. If there’s ever a next time, I’ll give him the stare down,” I said.

“I think you’ll like the results.”

The three of us cracked up.

“Say, you ain’t gonna join us here in the capital, Eizo?” Boris asked, his tone unusually serious.

I shrugged. “I was driven here from the north by extenuating circumstances, so I don’t want to live anywhere with too many people.”

The actual reason was because I wouldn’t be able to forge enough weapons without the magic in the Black Forest, but there was no need to tell Boris that. Besides that, I’d come to equate the capital with trouble, so it was hard to drudge up the desire to move here.

Boris’s shoulders slumped. “Oh...”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Naw, just that the edge on the knife you sharpened for me was wicked fine, and I’d hoped to see you more often.”

“Aaah.”

It was perfectly understandable to want a skilled craftsman wielding the whetstone. Of course a chef wanted the best tools kept in the best condition. For my part, I hadn’t needed to make much of an effort at all—the knife had already been of good quality, so I’d only had to make minor repairs.

I didn’t mind sharpening his knives now, but the lunchtime crowd would soon

come swarming in, and his knives would be needed for the cooking prep. I didn't want to disrupt their work. Also, even if I were to sharpen the knives this time, I had no plans to come to the capital regularly, so a rush job would be doubly insufficient.

Oh, I know.

"A merchant named Camilo does business in the capital. If you tell his workers I sent you, and entrust your knives to them, I can sharpen them and send them back."

"No lie?!"

"None. It'll take some time though. I go to Camilo's shop in the city every one or two weeks. I can pick up the knives there, sharpen them at my forge, and drop them off the next time I pass through the city. All in all, it'll take...well, a month or so. If you can go without your knives for that long, I'm happy to do it."

"More than happy!!!" Boris exclaimed, looking ready to jump for joy. Next to him, Martin nodded enthusiastically, so he was likely pleased too.

At that point, customers began to trickle into the restaurant, putting an end to my and Anne's short break.

"Give my regards to Pops. How much—" I began to ask.

Martin answered my unspoken inquiry with a grin, and Boris started to flex his muscles. Basically, they were telling me, "Shut up and go home."

I gave in. "Okay, okay, you win. I'll visit again, but if you need anything, just ask."

"Aye."

"Thanks for the grub," I said. As per northern custom, I added, "*Gochisosama*." Anne said her thanks as well.

Boris and Martin waved as they returned to the kitchen. We then turned away from them and left the restaurant.

Pops's booming voice followed us out. "You'd better come back! I'll know if you don't!"

“Now then, the others should be wrapping up, no?” I asked.

“We’ve been away for quite a while,” Anne remarked.

“Yeah, in fact, they might be sitting down for lunch. Shall we wander a bit before we head back?”

“All right.”

We weaved through the oceans of people. Since it was noon, there were plenty of street stalls hawking food too. Groups of people carrying well-worn weapons mingled with the crowd today, so Anne and I didn’t stand out.

“Do you think those are adventurers?” Anne asked.

“Hmmm, probably. There’s a lot of them today. Wonder if any large ruins have been discovered recently.”

“The kingdom is riddled with them. I’m sure there are plenty that have yet to be found.”

In this world, a long, long time ago, there had been a massive war between the demons and the other races (which had ended after the casualties incurred on both sides made it impossible to continue), but it had been preceded by several large-scale conflicts. So say the legends.

In some battles, the demons had emerged victorious, and in others, the outcome had been the opposite. During those times, swathes of buildings and structures, especially those used for military purposes, had been abandoned...apparently. These archaeological sites were collectively referred to as ruins. On occasion, war chests were found hidden within them.

No organization oversaw these treasures, so the rule was finders keepers. Granted, the safe option was turning the prize over to the lord of the region, but many adventurers explored the ruins looking to get rich quick.

That being said, there were a finite number of ruins. When there weren’t any new ones to be explored, adventurers worked as hired hands or mercenaries.

“They’re handy if you want certain info to be spread,” Anne remarked with a cold smile.

There was no such thing as an Adventurer’s Guild in this world. Adventurers

were seen as little better than common bandits. No doubt they exchanged information secretly among themselves for self-protection. Any info one could leak through that network would be sure to spread far and wide. Adventurers were better traveled than even merchants.

Had the empire employed such tactics before? Well, the kingdom and the republic were sure to have done the same. Maybe even the margrave sometimes took advantage of the network.

“You’ve never thought of becoming an adventurer, Eizo? Given your prowess with a sword?” Anne asked.

“No. All I want is to live a quiet life,” I told her.

“You can do just that if you come to the empire.”

“I can only see myself being wrung dry.”

“Oops, you caught me.”

“You’re too obvious.”

The two of us shared a laugh. I was sure that Anne’s heart hadn’t completely given up on swaying me to join the empire, but it seemed that she was no longer desperate to return to her homeland either.

That was a positive development; it wouldn’t be good for her to worry herself sick.

“But...” I said.

“Hm?”

“If there was an ore I wanted to get my hands on no matter what, then I might consider doing some exploring.”

“I see. And if you were to go...”

“Well, I’d be lonely all by myself, so I’d like to take my family with me if possible.”

A broad smile lit up Anne’s face. “Right.” It seemed that she’d picked up on the fact that “my family” included her as well. I hoped she would get along with the others.

We strolled through town, casually perusing the stall wares, and I turned my thoughts toward the future.

As we meandered the streets, I suddenly caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd.

“Is that...?” I muttered.

“Is what?” Anne asked.

“Someone I know.” The person in question had her back toward us and hadn’t noticed me, so I called out, “Heeey! Flore!”

Flore twisted around, scanning her surroundings until she finally spotted me waving. Her face brightened, and she jogged over. “Why, it’s Eizo! What are you doing here?”

“I had some business to take care of in the area, so I made the trip.”

Flore looked up at Anne beside me. “R-Right.” Her eyes narrowed. “You really are a Casanova.”

I grimaced. “You’ve got it all wrong.”



She laughed and asked, “What about the others?”

“They’re at home. Everyone’s doing well.”

“Good.” She grinned.

“So what have you been up to?”

Flore’s eyes snapped open wide like she had just remembered something.

“Right! I was in the middle of an errand.”

“Is that so? Sorry to interrupt.”

“Not at all. Drop by with the others next time,” Flore replied. “Sis will know where to go.”

“Got it.”

Flore waved broadly as she stepped back into the crowd.

“Who was that?” Anne asked, poking me in the side.

“Oh, she’s a mercenary who ran after Helen into the Black Forest.”

“Hmmm.”

“There sure wasn’t any time for a proper chat—she blew in and out like a whirlwind. You should introduce yourself the next time you meet.”

“Sure,” Anne replied.

Flore walked off, bobbing in and out of the sea of people, and we watched her fade into the crowd.

As we strolled the outer city, we browsed several stalls. I looked around for sparks of inspiration, but few shops dealt with weapons or armor. Despite the smattering of adventurers, it appeared that combat goods weren’t widely sold.

In their stead—though it wasn’t really a fair substitute—we found a booth selling daily necessities. We chatted with the shopkeeper, a young lad who looked all of fifteen.

“Oh, so your workshop is elsewhere?” I asked him.

“Yeah, that’s right. A little ways out of the capital. We bring our goods to sell

here.”

“So the workshops operating here in the capital don’t give you a hard time?”

“Those ones usually deal with nobles, so they don’t bother much with shops like ours,” he answered. “We rent out this plot, but just in case, we’ve talked things through with the closest craftsmen. Here.”

He jerked his chin at the building behind him. It had no signage, but it seemed to be a workshop. Sound could be heard from within—a wooden mallet hammering at something.

The goods crafted in that workshop likely didn’t compete with the stall’s wares. Perhaps they weren’t items that could be sold in a street stand. Of course, it was all conjecture—I had no idea what the workshop actually made. Nonetheless, the shop owners were still socially obligated to negotiate with the workshop, even if it was on a “just in case” basis. Stalls were rented after all, so the shopkeepers couldn’t afford to do anything that might inconvenience the landlord.

My point was that merchants operating in the capital had to observe at least a minimal level of business etiquette. The rules weren’t as *open* as in the city’s Open Market (hence why merchants had to pay a daily fee to set up shop there), but they weren’t strict either.

After we killed some time wandering around, we slowly made our way back to the inner city. I kept a casual eye out for trouble, but just like on our last family trip (or whatever you want to call it), there didn’t seem to be any miscreants around.

Admittedly, I doubted there would be a plethora of people champing at the bit to jump a man and a woman carrying a katana and a greatsword respectively. And if there *were* any such people around, they would’ve needed a very good motive. I could certainly think of a few reasons someone might want to attack us, but even so, they wouldn’t choose this very moment to pick a fight. The risk was just too high.

I flashed the passage token at the guard who was on duty at the inner wall, and we walked on through. There was definitely still foot traffic, but less

because the inner district was cut off from the tumult of the outer district. I didn't hate the subdued atmosphere, but I had to say...I preferred the outer city.

Anne and I were, once again, standouts in the crowd. We walked on toward the count's residence—the Eimoor house.

When we arrived, the guard at the gate (who was a familiar face) nodded and let us in. We gave our thanks and passed through. Inside, Bowman was ready to receive us.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I blurted out.

Bowman smiled. "Not at all. This may be indelicate to say in front of guests, but it was a good break for me. Waiting is part of the job."

I was relieved. Though, he was likely just being polite and reassuring the guests as a professional courtesy. In any case, as long as he didn't mind, it was all right.

Bowman guided us to a room where Camilo and Marius were chatting.

"What of His Imperial Majesty?" I asked.

"He's gone back. It's imperative that the matter be resolved as quickly as possible. Besides, while he was here, work was piling up in the empire. He told me to give his regards to his daughter."

"I see."

Never mind the margrave's whereabouts, I thought the emperor would come to see his daughter before he went. Apparently, he was so busy that he couldn't even do that.

"Sorry," I said to Anne.

She smiled softly. "It's all right. I expected this to happen." She didn't look like she was forcing herself to say that either. Could it be that, even in the empire, she only had the chance to speak with her father every once in a while?

As her new family, I hoped we'd be able to provide her with more time to chat.

“All right, now that Eizo’s back, shall we call it a day?” Camilo said, trying to dispel the solemn atmosphere. He stood up.

I kept my tone light as I responded, “Yeah. There’s no need for us to stay longer.”

“Come visit us once in a while, won’t you?” Marius asked.

I chuckled. “You’re a busy man—I’m sparing you the work.”

At that, we left the room. It was now time for me to go home with our new family member.

Camilo, Anne, and I got into the horse-drawn cart. Marius accompanied us to the gate, waving goodbye as we rode away from the Eimoor residence.

“A farewell from the jolly ol’ count himself. Who woulda thunk?” I joked.

“We *do* have a princess from the empire with us,” Camilo said, returning the banter. “There’s no questioning who’s higher on the social ladder. She sits above even the margrave.”

“True. When you put it that way, I suppose it was only the polite thing to do.”

“As for us,” he continued, “you’re a blacksmith and I’m a merchant, so the bottom rung is where we belong. And we’re all the happier for it!”

“Hear, hear!” I agreed, and we shared a laugh.

“Count Eimoor is even more approachable than I’d heard,” Anne remarked.

I nodded. “Yup. I can’t share the details of our history with you, but I, for one, consider him a friend.”

“What about me? Am I considered a friend as well?” Camilo asked teasingly.

“Jury’s still out.”

“*Tsk.*” He clicked his tongue deliberately.

This time, Anne and I were the ones to laugh. All the while, our cart was winding through the quiet streets of the inner city. At the gate, I saw that the guard from earlier was still on duty. As we rode through, our gazes met. His expression shifted to one of satisfaction.

He had probably been wondering about us—Anne and I certainly didn't look like nobility in our current garb, and we were openly carrying weapons. Now that he'd seen us on the cart, he'd likely concluded that we were bodyguards.

As we rode away, I looked back, watching the gate shrink into the distance. It was the last time I'd be laying eyes on the inner city for a while.

We emerged onto the crowded main street and then proceeded through the outer wall's gate.

"Did you know? Apparently, the reason the outer gate is so huge is to allow giants to pass through," I said.

"Really?" Anne asked.

"That's what I heard." From Camilo, if I remembered correctly. He didn't interrupt to say otherwise, but even if he hadn't been the source, I knew I'd heard it said somewhere.

"I've been told that our giant ancestors used to be much larger," Anne said.

"Oh ho."

"But that gate is *massive*. I have a hard time believing that the rulers of the city needed such large architecture to accommodate them."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." I peered at the gate. It was four or five times Anne's height. Perhaps there'd been a race of colossal giants. That could explain the sheer size.

"Since I'm half-human, I am on the shorter side. Giants are *big*, and not just in height. There are plenty of tales about times when size became a problem."

"For instance?"

"Flatware that is generously sized for a human can, for a giant, be tiny and hard to eat with," she replied.

"Same issue with clothing?"

"Yeah. A lot of fabric is needed for production, so garments take longer to make and cost more."

"Is that right? Oh, should we get some bigger bowls and plates for the cabin?"

I asked.

“No. I’m fine with normal-sized tableware. We might need to think about it if my mother ever pays a visit...but she is unlikely to ever do so.”

“I see.”

So Anne didn’t need special plates. However, another giant like her mother—in other words, a consort of the emperor—could potentially travel to our cabin. *Hmmm. On days when we haul back and butcher the hunting team’s catches, the afternoons are usually free. Maybe I’ll set one aside to carve some larger dinnerware.*

The cart finally emerged onto the road leading back to the city. It was a bright, sunny day. White clouds drifted overhead, floating down the ribbon of road that was flanked by green plains. A gentle breeze stroked the land, and the wild grass swayed, ticklish under the wind’s touch.

“Everything looks so peaceful, but somewhere in the world, gears are turning,” I said quietly, staring out at the scenery.

“Yes, *somewhere*,” Anne replied. “The difference in our social ranks notwithstanding, I find that we are often the ones doing the turning. This, of course, inevitably leads to conflict.”

“That’s true enough.”

I wanted to distance myself from that as much as I could, but as long as I had ties to greater society, it was impossible to avoid turmoil. And in Anne’s eyes (well, in the empire’s eyes), I belonged on the side of the kingdom.

Even so...

“Well, I hope to stay out of it,” I declared. I had a feeling I’d be readily pulled into all sorts of affairs if I didn’t make my intentions known up-front.

Anne didn’t say anything further on the subject.

We rode at a faster pace than usual, and there was daylight left when we reached the forest entrance. That said, we were approaching the hour when the glow of the setting sun would dye the world in shades of red.

“Mind if we borrow torches from you just in case?” I asked Camilo.

“Sure. Take as many as you want, free of charge,” he said. “At least for today. The next set of torches...you’ll pay for.”

“Money grubber.”

“I’m a merchant. It’s what we do.”

Camilo and I laughed as we exchanged a handshake. It was farewell for today. Home was still a little ways ahead.

Shortly after entering the forest, our surroundings began to take on an orange hue, just as I’d expected. Our elongated shadows slowly crossed through the transformed scenery.

We didn’t say a word to each other, passing between the trees in silence.

I had thought we’d be able to reach the cabin *just* before the light waned, but it seemed I was off the mark—black began to bleed into the sunset’s orange tones.

“As a precaution, let’s light the torches now while we can still see,” I said.

“Good idea.”

I removed the necessary tools from my bag and lit the torches, painting our surroundings orange once more.

Anne and I resumed walking, and a moment later, she muttered, “You know...”

“What?” I asked.

“Right now...I’m pretty happy.”

I couldn’t say much in response, so I encouraged her to continue.

“My days as a princess were interesting in their own way. It’s who I am, after all.”

The rustle of our footsteps resonated in our surroundings.

“But since coming to live with you, I’ve been able to relax, *truly* relax, for the first time in my life.”

“I see.”

“And now I can return to those days with all of you. So, I’m happy.”

“Glad to hear it,” I replied. “You’ll be helping us out in the forge, but in general, we all take it pretty easy.”

“I’m certainly looking forward to it,” Anne said. The excitement in her tone contrasted with the darkness around us.

If she had been thinking, “I can’t believe I’m going to be living in the middle of the woods from now on. The horror!” then she would’ve been in for a hard time. I was relieved that didn’t seem to be the case, at least as far as her words were concerned.

Around the time the forest became completely dark, we saw light that wasn’t coming from our own torches.

Home.

Everyone was standing outside the door. Krul and Lucy were sitting in front of the cabin too.

“Hold on a second,” I said.

Anne stared at me as if to say, “What now?” but out loud, she said, “Okay.”

I passed her my torch. Then, I walked a few paces toward the cabin and turned around to face her.

The forest was completely silent; not even the wind was audible. But then, the chorus of everyone’s voices, mine included, cut through the quiet.

“Welcome home, Anne.”

Anne looked shocked at first, but her expression changed in a heartbeat. I couldn’t tell if she was laughing or crying.

“Everyone...I’m home.”

Epilogue: In the Empire's National Library

Under the sponsorship of the imperial family, a library had been built in the empire. Its catalog of books and publications spanned time and space...or so it was said.

"It sure is massive." I stood at the doors, which had been left open.

Previously, I'd thought the boast about the library's vast collection could be nothing more than that—a boast, designed to show off the nation's prestige. However, now that I was actually here, I realized I'd been mistaken. This place had undoubtedly been sponsored by the imperial family. Without their aid, such a huge library could've never been built.

I was here today because I'd heard that Eizo had been involved with the library's establishment.

A commonplace blacksmith had persuaded the imperial family to wield its might and construct such a library. This idea was absurd, even to me, and I'd heard similarly preposterous accounts that had turned out to be true. And, if I felt that the truth was ridiculous, then what must others think? How could people without access to such information even believe it?

I looked up at the immense facade of the library before stepping inside.

The interior was shrouded in a tranquil air. The quiet was so profound that the sound of my own footsteps made me wince. It was dim; there was little natural light. The paltry beams of sunlight shining down from the skylights were all that lit the hall.

I was tempted to tiptoe, but I curbed the urge and walked normally. My destination was a little way into the library.

"This must be it..." I muttered.

The specially designed room was set slightly apart from the stacks. This was what I had come for. A large window in the room allowed brilliant sunshine to stream in, illuminating the space.

A large painting hung on the wall. The subject was a young woman dressed in luxurious clothing and bathed in sunlight. She was staring out at me, smiling softly.

The woman was Annemarie Christine Weisner, a princess of the empire.

A metal plaque beneath the portrait of Her Imperial Highness explained the reason it had been hung here: “This institute was constructed under the command of Princess Annemarie, whose creed is ‘Knowledge should be divided among all the people.’”

I see. The library had been backed by the imperial family, no mistaking it. But that wasn’t what I wanted to know.

In one corner of the plaque, I spied something—the relief of a sitting cat turned on its side.

When a normal smith was commissioned for a piece, they’d mark the work as theirs, usually with a small engraving deliberately designed to be inconspicuous. Had I not searched for it (believing it would be there), I likely wouldn’t have found it. And, considering what I had come to know of Eizo through stories, there must have been quite the battle over this one carving.

An unwitting chuckle escaped my lips.

Why? Well, the mark was proof that the supposedly ordinary blacksmith had ties to the princess. As someone who actively avoided the spotlight—going as far as to erase records of his existence from the kingdom—he wouldn’t have eagerly left such conclusive evidence of his connection to the imperial family.

I searched the room for other signs of his work.

An immense greatsword was on display—it stood at odds to this sanctuary of knowledge. Apparently, it was “a cherished weapon of Her Imperial Highness.” I had a difficult time believing that the genteel lady with the soft smile in the portrait had wielded such a sword. However, Her Highness was half-giant, so maybe it was only appropriate for the sword to be so large.

The mark of the cat was on the sword as well. Rike had hinted that Her Highness had stayed at Forge Eizo, though it was not public knowledge.

It seemed the story was true.

I continued to look for records of Eizo's life. The remnants were like faint scents on a breeze, but I wanted to collect as much information as possible. As I was examining a few of the display items—the query of my inspection was predetermined—someone behind me spoke.

“You hunt with fervor.”

I whipped around to find the subject of the portrait come to life.

Indeed, standing in the light streaming in from the window was Her Imperial Highness.

She smiled, though the expression lacked the practiced elegance and affection of the one in the painting. Instead, her expression brought to mind a pot on the edge of boiling over—a smile behind which secrets were roiling.

“You seem to have picked up on more than a few things,” she continued.

“Ah, no, I'm...” I stuttered, incoherent, feeling as if I had done something wrong.

Watching me, she smiled again, softly this time. “You need not be so afraid of me. In fact, I was waiting.”

“Waiting?” I echoed.

“Yes. For the one who is quietly taking steps to preserve the existence of *that man*... The man who refuses to take the stage. He has changed the fate of this country in a minor but very real way.”

She ran a hand lightly over the hilt of the greatsword. Her gaze was not focused on the present; memories of her days in the Black Forest were likely scrolling before her mind's eye.

“Do you wish to listen?” she asked.

“Yes, of course.”

She nodded slowly, giving me permission, and I scrambled to take out my notes and writing utensils.

The Story of How We Met VIII: In the Footsteps of the One She Admires

“What?! No way!” The shout echoed through the decidedly small structure.

This building, located in the kingdom’s capital, was the base of a certain mercenary troop. The exclamation rang through the cafeteria...or so it was called, but it was no more than a room where mercenaries could gather that was set apart from the common area. Several people (besides the offender) were lounging in the cafeteria.

This was an all-female troop. That was why—or not *why* per se—they were used to commotion. The loud exclamation hardly captured people’s attention, and the hustle and noise in the room did not diminish one bit.

The holler had come from a young woman whose mid-length red hair was bundled into a braid on one side of her head. Her clothing was loose and unrestrictive. Overall, she gave off a lively and spirited impression.

She wasn’t on a job at the moment, so she wasn’t carrying any weapons. Rather, she was relaxing and having a leisurely conversation with her fellow troop mates. The trigger for her exclamation had been when the discussion turned to someone else.

“Helen hasn’t been around lately.”

Yes, Helen was far and away the strongest in the troop, and she was often called away from the capital for long periods. However, before her latest job, she’d said she would return soon.

Contrary to Helen’s claim, a long time had passed since she’d gone away.

In their line of work, it wasn’t all that unusual for someone not to come back. The red-haired mercenary knew that well. If that were the case—if there had been conclusive news—then so be it. For example, if Helen, whose prowess had earned the nickname Lightning Strike, had been done in by a simple arrow, the story would have spread like wildfire through the other mercenaries.

However, the young red-haired woman had heard no such rumors. She'd asked her friend why Helen had been away, and the reason had shocked her into yelling out loud.

"Flore! Lower your voice!" the friend said.

The red-haired mercenary, Flore, shrugged and stuck out her tongue impishly. "My bad, my bad. But why the Black Forest?"

"There's no way I'd know something like that."

The other mercenary had short, black hair and was dressed in comfortable, utilitarian clothing. She'd received the full blast of Flore's shout at close distance, and her nose wrinkled to show displeasure at her friend's outburst.

Flore had learned just a moment ago that Helen was apparently in the Black Forest, which even Flore knew to be dangerous territory. Beastfolk lived within its boundaries, but it was also home to ferocious, free-roaming animals and even magical beasts.

The shock that Helen—strong or not—had gone *there* of all places was so great that Flore's surprise had exploded out of her mouth.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why...?" Flore stuttered. Why in the world had Helen ventured into the Black Forest? She should have no reason to stay there for very long.

Not for this reason...and not for that one. The young mercenary and her friend brainstormed answers to the mystery. There was one that caught Flore's attention: Helen had gone into the forest to grow even stronger.

Of course, Helen hadn't said anything similar herself, but from what she *had* said, she'd been to the Black Forest before.

The first time she'd gone, she'd emerged with her now beloved dual blades, and she'd gone a second time to have the weapons maintained. Timing-wise, it was too soon for the blades to need repairing, and in the past, she'd quickly returned from her trips.

What other reason could there be? After thinking it through, Flore came up with the most reasonable explanation—Helen had gone to polish her skills even

further by hunting wild animals and magical beasts in the forest.

###

“Are you really going?” Flore’s friend asked skeptically.

“Of course! It looks like we’re not gonna have any work for a while, and I’m curious, so I’m going.”

The next morning, Flore had come out dressed in traveling clothes. Flore’s friend was wearing her everyday clothing, so apparently, she wasn’t going on the journey with Flore.

“Be careful,” Flore’s friend said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll turn right around at the first sign of danger.”

Her friend sighed. “If only.” She knew that when Flore was absorbed with something, she had a habit of not returning when she should. However, Flore was bouncing on her feet, and her eyes were glittering with excitement, so the other mercenary gave up on saying something.

“All right, I’m off!” Flore announced, walking off and waving her hand overhead.

“Come back safe,” replied her friend.

All kinds of adventures flashed before Flore’s eyes. She was heading into dangerous territory, but she was also excited to be visiting a new place. On top of that, there was a sense of triumph—Flore was traveling to where Helen (the person she admired) had gone.

Flore was always chasing after Helen. When she caught up, Helen would surely greet her with an exasperated expression and tell her to go home. But if Flore dragged her feet doing so, Helen would just as surely give in and let her stay until the end.

Flore walked on with a spring in her step. She didn’t yet know, but what awaited her was an adventure beyond her wildest imagination.

She hurried toward the main thoroughfare at a brisk pace.

Afterword

Greetings. I'm confident no one out there is picking up this series on the sixth volume, so I'll dispense with the nice-to-meet-you. This is Tamamaru, a writer by night and a man in his forties at all times of day.

First of all, thank you for reading. For anyone who hasn't purchased the volume yet, you could make a lot of people happy by bringing this volume to the register. Me, for example. Probably my supervisor as well.

Now then, unlike the fourth and fifth volumes, this volume closely follows the developments in the web novel. Nonetheless, I've put effort into this compilation so that readers of the web novel will be able to enjoy it as well.

Originally, I had only imagined this story as a web serial. I'd never considered that it might be novelized, so I ran into a few—nearly debilitating—hiccups along the way. However, the idea of cutting down words on purpose to suit the novel doesn't sit well with me either. This is a balance that I've pondered time and time again.

Anyway, this volume sees the introduction of a new family member—a high-ranking heroine from the empire, no less. She's the first since two volumes ago.

The series could've just been about various people in the kingdom. Make no mistake, it'll continue to center around Eizo and his friends, and I don't plan to deviate from the (self-proclaimed perhaps) run-of-the-mill blacksmith and his run-of-the-mill life. But I did want to expand the universe a tad. I also thought it would be interesting to provide a perspective on Forge Eizo from someone outside of the kingdom. That was how Anne was born.

Anne's role overlaps with Diana's to some extent, but one is external to the kingdom and one is internal. That is how I hope to have them participate in the story. I'll do my best to make that a reality.

The tale of the lackadaisical family will develop from here on out, so please look forward to it. The web version is a little ahead of the novelization. Anyone

curious to see what happens, please do read the web version on Kakuyomu or Shosetsuka ni Naro.

Himori Yoshi-sensei's comics have been received with fanfare and are still ongoing. The first two volumes of the comics cover the first volume of the novel. Several digital chapters have been released beyond that as well. I would be pleased if you would give it a try.

The audiobook is being published through ListenGo. You can experience a completely different world through Sawada Tomomi-san's narration. If you're interested, you know what to do. By the time this volume is released, the audiobook versions of the first four volumes should be available, spanning nearly thirty-six full hours. They're definitely worth a listen.

In addition, the ASMR audio drama featuring Diana (played by Akesaka Satomi-san) is being published through Mimicle. Please give it a listen as well.

Below are my acknowledgments.

Kinta-sensei has once again snipped a character straight from my imagination and brought her to life. Thank you for the character design and the beautiful cover and insert illustrations. My head, bowed in respect, can never be raised again. In fact, I am putting my all into driving it farther into the ground.

As always, thanks to Himori Yoshi-sensei, who is in charge of the comic serialization. I hope to see it rise to be Japan's number one comic. I'm counting on you from here on out too.

To the audiobook narrator Sawada Tomomi-san, you have brought forth a new face to the series. For that I am grateful.

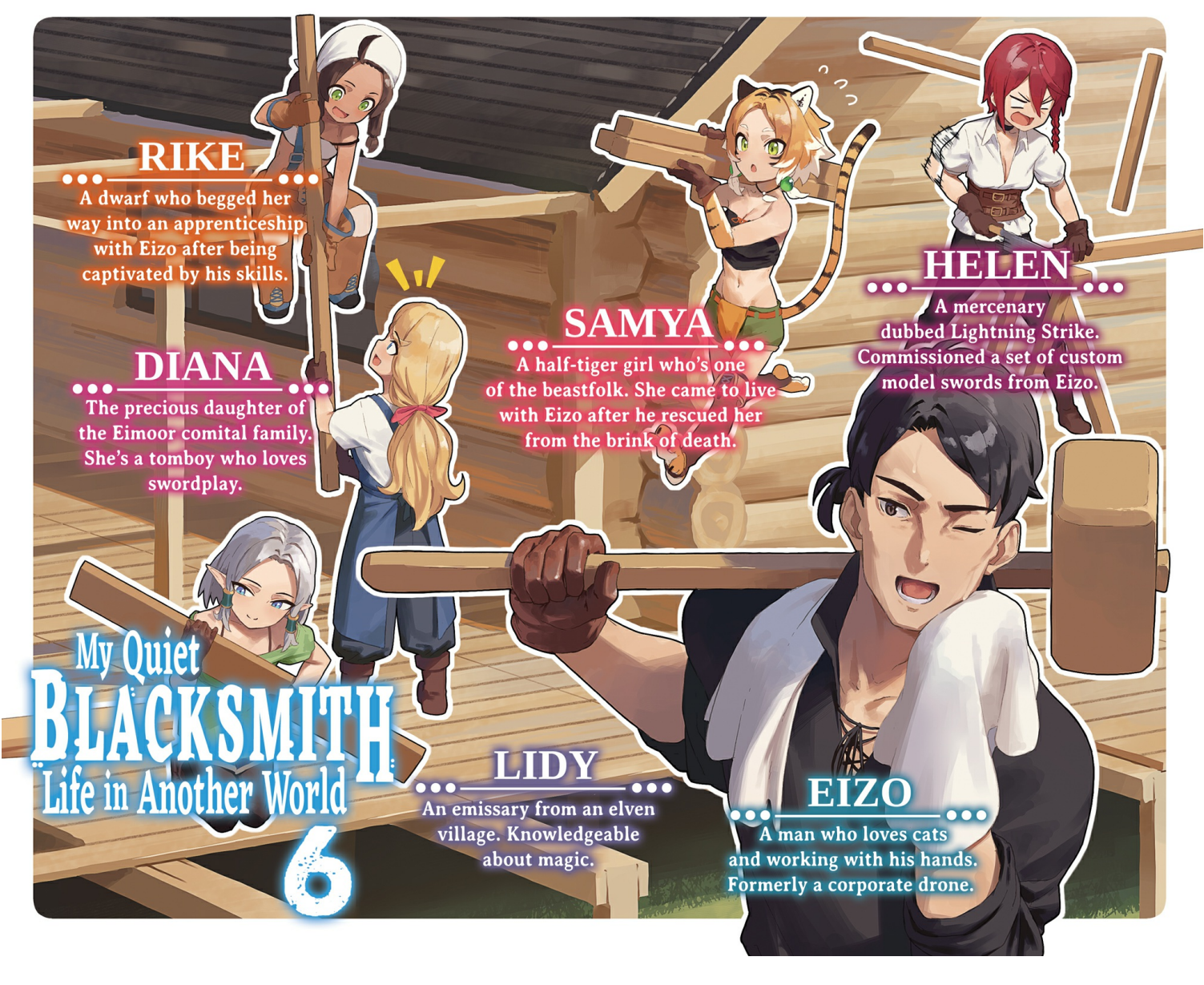
Thanks to my editor I-san for pouring everything into the work and for accommodating the schedule demands of my day job.

Chama and Konbu, the two cats back home, continue to give me strength.

My mother, my little sister, and my friends—as always, thank you.

Last but not least, I give my biggest thanks to all the readers who have continued following the series up through this volume.

Let us meet again in the afterword of volume seven!



RIKE

A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

DIANA

The precious daughter of the Eimoor comital family. She's a tomboy who loves swordplay.

SAMYA

A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

HELEN

A mercenary dubbed Lightning Strike. Commissioned a set of custom model swords from Eizo.

LIDY

An emissary from an elven village. Knowledgeable about magic.

EIZO

A man who loves cats and working with his hands. Formerly a corporate drone.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World

6



*Hand
her over.
Play nice
and we'll
spare you.*

ANNE

Came to Forge Eizo to ask for a commission. The empire's seventh imperial princess.

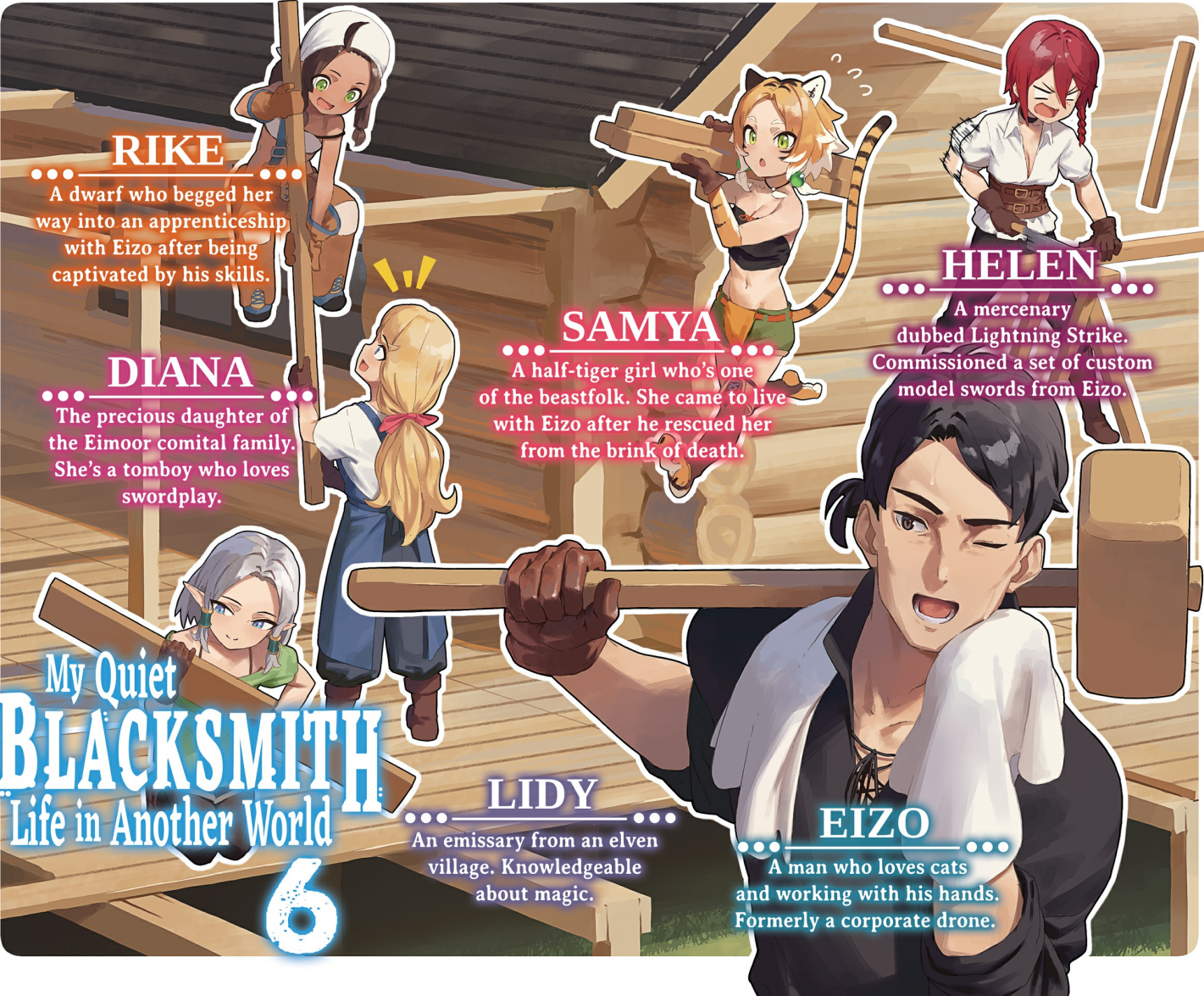
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Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

6

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: Over in the Empire](#)

[Chapter 1: Ordinary Days in the Black Forest](#)

[Chapter 2: To Forge or Not to Forge](#)

[Chapter 3: A Letter to the Emperor](#)

[Chapter 4: A Slightly Different Kind of Morning](#)

[Chapter 5: Peace Talks behind Closed Doors](#)

[Chapter 6: Another Member of the Family](#)

[Epilogue: In the Empire's National Library](#)

[The Story of How We Met VIII: In the Footsteps of the One She Admires](#)

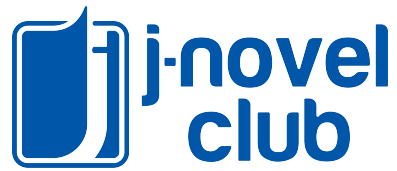
[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 6

by Tamamaru

Translated by Linda Liu Edited by C.D. Leeson

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